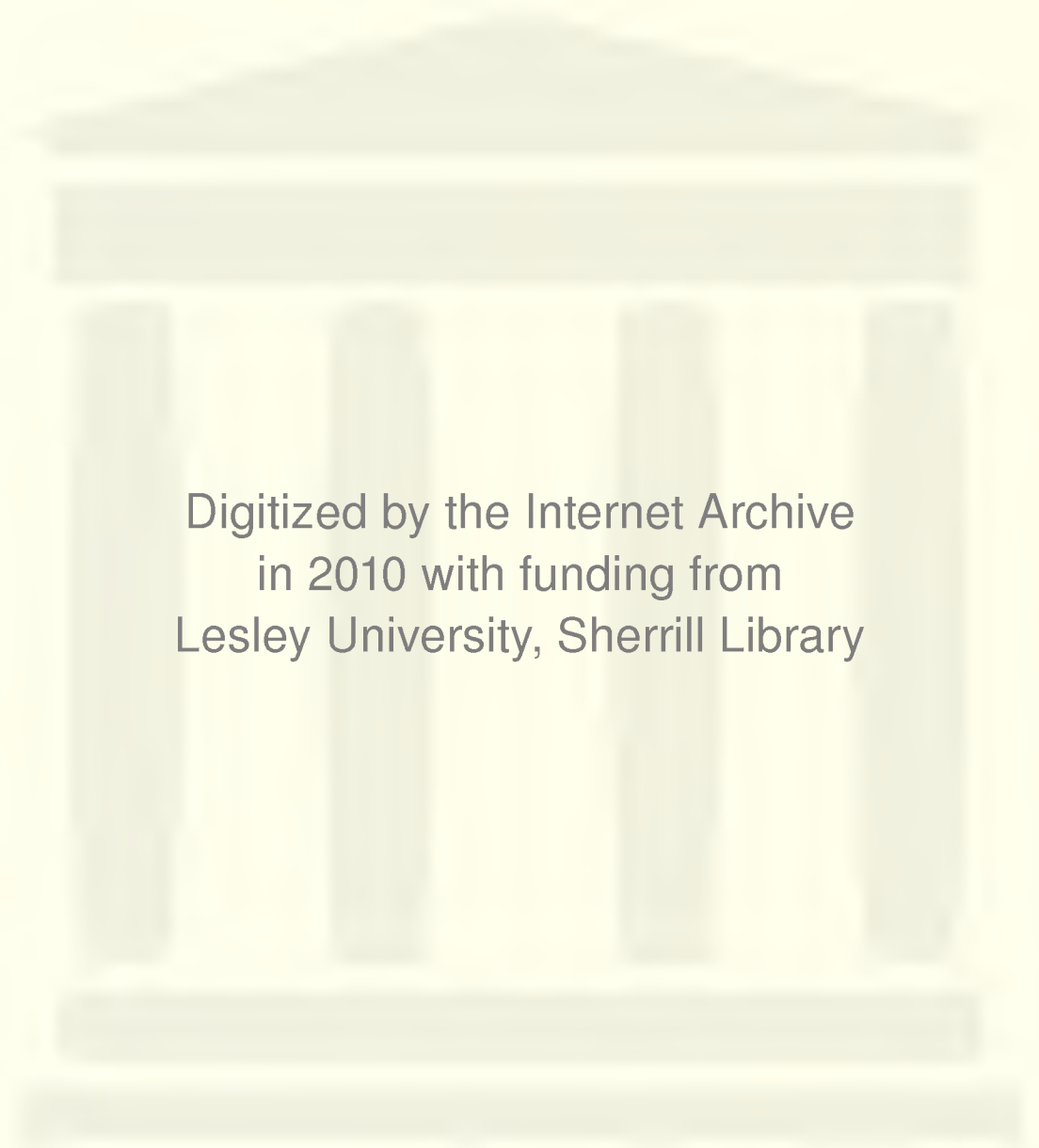
Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
Lesley University, Sherrill Library

http://www.archive.org/details/midlifeexperienc00paul

LUDCKE LIBRARY
Babson College
Malden Street
Cambridge, MA 02138-2790

For Reference

Not to be taken from this room

THE MIDLIFE EXPERIENCE OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN

VIEWS ALONG THE MIDWAY

A DISSERTATION

submitted by

PAULA DEANGELIS PANCHUCK

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

LESLEY COLLEGE GRADUATE SCHOOL
May, 1994

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my deepest thanks and appreciation to the following people who made a significant contribution to this project:

To the wonderful women in this study, who so generously shared their personal experiences and thoughts about midlife and aging.

To Dr. Catherine DeLorey, my senior advisor, who inspired and guided me as both teacher and friend during the last five years.

To Dr. Lee Ann Hoff, who supported my work through her valuable insights and helpful critiques.

To Dr. Frank Davis, who provided assistance and suggestions for my research.

To Dr. Ann Breslin, who encouraged me at the start and whose memory remains with me at the finish.

To treasured family members and friends, who were always so willing to listen and to offer their love and support when I needed it most.

To my daughter Melissa, a pride and joy of my own midlife, who continuously shared her love and appreciation of my work.

To my husband, Michael, who was unfailingly patient and understanding throughout this project and who helped sustain my commitment through his love and timely reminders of his faith and pride in my endeavors and accomplishments.

Table of Contents

Dissertation Approval Form.....2

Acknowledgments.....3

Table of Contents.....4

List of Tables.....7

Abstract.....8

Chapter 1. Introduction and Statement of the Problem.....9

Purpose of the Study.....11

Research Questions.....12

Theoretical Framework and Assumptions Guiding the Study.....12

Relevance of the Study.....13

Chapter 2. Review of Relevant Literature.....15

The Lifespan Developmental Perspective.....16

The Stage Theory Model.....18

The Life Events Model.....19

Research on Women's Development.....20

Midlife and Menopause.....21

Images of Midlife.....24

Chapter 3. Methodology.....28

Operational Definition of Midlife 28

Research Design.....29

Selection of Sample.....30

Description of Sample.....32

Instrumentation.....34

Pilot Studies.....35
Data Collection.....36
Data Analysis.....37
Chapter 4. Expectations of Midlife and Aging.....38
Expectations of Midlife.....39
Expectations of Aging.....43
Chapter 5. Descriptions of the Midlife Years.....57
Fulfillment vs. Crisis.....57
Sense of Self.....63
Physical Well-being.....69
Appearance.....69
Health.....72
Menopause.....75
Sexuality.....80
Relationships.....83
Husbands and Partners.....83
Parents and Siblings.....86
Children and Grandchildren.....90
Friendships.....93
Spirituality and Community.....98
Satisfaction with Life Choices.....101
Chapter 6. Summary and Discussion.....107
Summary of Findings.....108
Expectations of Midlife.....109
Descriptions of Midlife.....109
Expectations of Aging.....114

Discussion.....114

The Midlife Experience.....115

Methodological Issues.....117

Theoretical Significance.....118

Considerations for Professional Practice.....121

References.....123

Appendix.....136

Appendix A: Introductory Letter to Participants....137

Appendix B: Consent Form.....138

Appendix C: Interview Questions.....139

List of Tables

Table 1 Annual Personal Income.....33

Table 2 Annual Income for Sole Household Supports.....34

Table 3 Annual Income for Shared Household Support.....34

Abstract

Title: The Midlife Experience of Contemporary Women: Views Along the Midway

Author: Paula DeAngelis Panchuck

Examines the experience of midlife and the expectations of midlife and aging of 22 Caucasian, African American, Latina, Chinese, and Asian-Indian midlife women, ages 40 to 60, who differ in sexual orientation, income, employment, marital and parenting status. Influenced by social and family expectations for women in their early years, most women expected midlife would include husband, home and family. The women describe midlife as positive and fulfilling, disclaim the relevance of "midlife crisis" to their lives and report higher levels of self-confidence, self-reliance and self-understanding. Tempered by an awareness of imperfect circumstances in their lives and compassion for their own human qualities, most women express satisfaction with their life choices and view the prospect of aging in a positive light. For some women, financial difficulties and the absence of an intimate relationship with another person cause displeasure in midlife and a less positive anticipation of aging.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of the Problem

> The work of inquiry in which I am engaged proceeds by this experience of mine...asking how it is organized, how it is determined...
> (Smith, 1979, p. 135)

The catalyst for this study was a blend of intellectual curiosity and personal experience as a woman on the threshold of midlife. Shortly after my 40th birthday, I sat in the audience with more than 200 women at a conference entitled "At the Midpoint: Women at Midlife" (Natick, MA, 1989) and listened to Diana Laskin Siegel, co-author of Ourselves, Growing Older - Women Aging with Knowledge and Power (1987, p. xxii), read the following verse:

Whole
Woman of the ^ Year

Have you ever known a woman named "November"?
Neither have I.
Now "May" and "June" and "April" have their namesakes -
Ever ask why?

We rarely picture woman as autumnal;
Female is spring.
Please, someone, name a newborn girl "October"
And hear her sing.

Of harvest cut and growth complete and fruit mature,
Not just of birth.
Oh, let woman age as seasons do;
Love each time's worth!

Miriam Corcoran

As Siegel finished her reading, the participants, predominantly midlife and older women, reacted with long and energetic applause. Their impassioned comments supported the

poem's message that the decades after age 40 can be a rich and fulfilling time "when we as women can come into our own" (Doress & Siegel, 1987, page xxii). I offered my own applause in support of the group based on personal observations that the years after 40 are a dynamic, satisfying, fulfilling time of life for women.

Eight months earlier, however, I had experienced a very different occurrence in sharp contrast to the conference participants' positive attitude about the richness and promise of the midlife years. On the occasion of my 40th birthday, an age popularly viewed as the mathematical midway point of the lifespan, I witnessed a different picture of life after that magic age. Well-meaning birthday salutations, greeting cards and graphic jokes about aging painted a joyless and ominous picture of the years to come.

From these diverse, colorful images emerged a vision of midlife as a midway that extended beyond a numerical explanation. A new interpretation of a midway, as a central path at a carnival or fair that is filled with a variety of experiences and challenges, fit the vivid and varied images of midlife that had presented themselves to me.

As a 40 year old woman at the midway point of the lifespan, I was motivated by the personal experience of conflicting internal and external images about the two decades ahead of me. I began a search for information that would clarify the developmental nature of the experiences and

challenges women encounter in moving along the midway.

Population statistics for the United States reveal that women in their midlife years are at an unparalleled threshold in history. According to the 1990 United States census, 17.3% of the country's population consists of women from the middle adulthood age of 35 to 64 years. Population projections indicate this number will increase to over 20.7% by the year 2010. As a result of this significant demographic shift, greater numbers of women are entering midlife and the proportion of the population comprised of midlife women is becoming larger than ever before.

Yet despite their proportionately large representation in the adult population, midlife as well as older women have been largely ignored in research. A clear developmental picture of the midlife years as well as a portrayal that has relevance to women's lives has yet to be fully formulated.

Purpose of the Study

A significant gap in knowledge exists in regard to the study of women in midlife. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of this phase of the life span through interviews with a diverse population of 40 to 60 year old women. In addition to illuminating the experience of the middle years, this research was also designed to examine the women's expectations of midlife and aging.

Research Questions

This study focused on a central research question: What is the midlife experience of contemporary women?. In addition to the central research question, the study addressed several related questions: What are the advantages and difficulties of the midlife years for women? Is the midlife experience of women what they expected it would be? Where do expectations of midlife and aging come from in women's lives?

Theoretical Framework and Assumptions Guiding the Study

The theoretical framework that guided this research was comprised of four major themes: growth and change as a lifelong process, the holistic nature of development, gender differences in development, and the importance of sociocultural and historical context. These themes can be expanded to encompass several related assumptions regarding research on women in midlife, as follows.

1. The theme of growth and change as a lifelong process implies that human development is a process that continues throughout the lifespan from conception to death. Its assumptions are that positive and negative changes occur throughout the lifespan as well as at each specific stage of the life cycle and that the midlife years are a dynamic period of a woman's life in which these various changes occur.

2. The holistic nature of development conceptualizes growth as an integrated rather than piecemeal process of

physical, psychosocial and cognitive changes. It assumes an interrelationship of these developmental domains and the importance of understanding each one at any point in the lifespan, including midlife, without diminishing or overemphasizing the importance of any one.

3. The theme of gender differences in development encompasses a number of developmental issues in women's lives that are different than those in men's lives. The theme's related assumption is that the inherent bias of most developmental research which fails to account for the female experience limits the understanding of the midlife years for women.

4. Sociocultural and historical context are aspects of an important lens through which the experiences of women must be viewed. The related assumption of this theme is that the perceptions and experiences of contemporary midlife women are influenced by cultural biases, expectations and opportunities as well as by the historical changes in the role of women.

Relevance of the Study

The results of this study will clarify the developmental picture of the midlife years for women. Acquired from the voices of women themselves, the information helps to distinguish reality from what Susan Sontag has called the "ordeal of the imagination" (1979, p. 29) about the midlife experience.

The findings are beneficial to midlife women in examining and affirming themes in their own development. In addition, they have significance for younger women as well, since they seek authentic information that will contribute to optimal development in their second half of life.

Finally, this study presents members of the helping professions with developmental data that is based on the experiences of midlife women. This relevant information that is pertinent to women will assist these specialists in meeting their needs in professional practice.

In summary, this study was developed to enhance the developmental picture of the period of the lifespan from ages 40 to 60 by exploring women's descriptions of their lives along the midway. In addition, it was designed to illuminate the forces that influence women's expectations of their midlife years as well as those that shape their expectations of aging.

Chapter 2: Review of Relevant Literature

A review of the literature concerning adult development reveals a lack of an integrated body of developmental theory that is relevant to midlife women (Fodor & Franks, 1990). Spurred in large part by the gradual increase in life expectancy and the resulting increase in length of adulthood, systematic study of adult development has expanded over the last twenty years (Baltes, 1987; Brim & Kagan, 1980).

Although increasing numbers of social scientists have drawn attention to the adult years, little attention has been paid to the midlife decades. They have been accorded insufficient importance in many developmental conceptualizations. Neglect of the midlife years is particularly true with regard to the study of women (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983; Berkun, 1985; Fodor & Franks, 1990; Gergen, 1990; Giele, 1982; Roberts & Newton, 1987). The need to closely examine this unique period in the lifespan, in a manner relevant to the lives of women, continues to challenge contemporary adult development research.

From the literature that relates to women's midlife experience, this chapter reviews the following major categories:

- The Lifespan Developmental Perspective,
- Research on Women's Development,

- Menopause and Midlife,
- Images of Midlife.

The Lifespan Developmental Perspective

The lifespan perspective, which views development as a process occurring from birth to death, is an important area of developmental research which has come forth in the last two decades. This perspective has significant implications for the study of the midlife experience of women. In the past, the study of human development was largely confined to the study of the child and the adolescent (Berger, 1988). This was due, in part, to the assumptions that development ended in adolescence and the adult years were a time of stability and continuity (Schaie & Geiwitz, 1982). In addition, the shorter life expectancy of people in earlier times resulted in a view of adulthood as a less salient part of the lifespan than the early years.

Today, aging is a more prominent societal issue than it was years ago as the United States makes a demographic shift from a youthful to an aging culture (Dychtwald & Flower, 1989). These demographic changes and the concurrent increase in public and professional interest in aging and its lifelong precursors are pivotal influences in the emergence of a different developmental perspective (Baltes, 1982, 1987).

Primarily concerned with longterm developmental

processes, a lifespan perspective has evolved as a theoretical orientation informed by two basic assumptions. The first assumption is that development continues throughout life and is not limited to or completed during the early and adolescent years (Baltes & Nesselroade, 1979; Lachman, 1984; Neugarten, 1979). The second assumption is that what people experience in later years of life is shaped by their cumulative life history as part of a continuous, dynamic, interactive process (Hareven, 1982) in which adulthood is as amenable to change as youth (Neugarten, 1979).

The lifespan perspective of development stresses that each life phase must be considered in reference to other phases and that a developmental orientation may be applied to the study of adulthood as well as the early years (Brim & Kagan, 1980). From this perspective, midlife can be viewed as embedded within the life cycle, as an outcome of earlier experiences and events, an antecedent of the future, and a time of generativity, satisfaction and competence (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984). When viewed through the lifespan lens, change appears multidirectional and each period of the lifespan, including midlife, is distinguished by both developmental gain and loss (Baltes, 1987; Brim & Kagan, 1980; Hunter & Sundel, 1989; Lachman, 1984).

From the lifespan perspective, two distinct conceptualizations dominate adult development research: the stage theory model and the life events model. Stage theories

emphasize normative or predictable developmental challenges or conflicts and attempt to describe common or universal forms of individual change that take place during adulthood. The life events model emphasizes the key role of timing in pacing adult development and the variability among individuals that is characteristic of adulthood (Fodor & Franks, 1990; Giele, 1982; Hunter & Sundel, 1989; Rossi, 1980; Rybash, Roodin & Santrock, 1991).

The Stage Theory Model

The stage theory developmental model is a controversial one. Disagreements abound regarding its rigid categorization of developmental patterns and behaviors into specific periods in the lifespan and its oversimplification of adult development which occurs with more change and less predictability than such an approach suggests (Neugarten & Datan, 1979).

For some researchers, such as Erikson (1950, 1980, 1986), Loevinger (1970), Vaillant (1977), Gould (1978) and Levinson (1978), stage theory provides a coherent framework to describe the stability and change in the adult years and to highlight dominant themes, transitions and orientation toward self and others in human development. But with their emphasis on fixed life phases that unfold in a sequence irrespective of contextual variation, stage theories often fail to consider gender as a critical influence on development, thus limiting their application to women. In addition, they ignore the

developmental impact of important considerations such as race, social class, or cultural and historical setting. These factors exert a strong influence on people's lives and alter the way developmental stages occur or do not occur in an individual's lifetime (Gergen, 1980; Giele, 1982; Gubrium & Buckhold, 1977; Guillemard, 1982; McCrae & Costa, 1984; Neugarten, 1980; Neugarten & Datan, 1979).

The Life Events Model

An alternative to the lifespan perspective's stage theory approach to adult development is the life events, or timing of events, model which provides a more appropriate framework for research on midlife women. This model recognizes the critical role of the sociocultural context and life stage context in which each life event occurs (Berkun, 1985; Brim & Ryff, 1980; Gognalons-Nicolet, 1985; Neugarten, 1980; Neugarten & Datan, 1979).

The life events model minimizes an historically popular methodological decontextualization that isolates subjects from their personal circumstances by overlooking important social and cultural factors in their development. In order to understand the environment's effects upon women, the life events model dictates an examination of the cultural expectations, stereotypes, and imbalances in social and political power that affect each gender as well as the impact of these forces upon life circumstances (Berkun, 1985; Bourbieux, 1980; Gergen, 1988; Giele, 1982; Peck, 1986;

Neugarten, 1980; Neugarten & Datan, 1979).

Research on Women's Development

In addition to increased interest in the study of adult development, research on women has emerged within the social sciences and rapidly increased in volume over the last twenty years. Researchers concerned with women's lives argue that many developmental theories, some of which have endured for decades within the psychological literature, reflect an evaluative bias in their failure to account for the experience of women in their observations and interpretations of behavior. These androcentric theories hold up the male experience as the exemplary model and either ignore the experiences of women, interpret those experiences in masculine terms, or generalize male experiences into the lives of women. Further criticism of these developmental theories emphasizes their treatment of women as a deviation from the male norm and their assumption that females are the inferior or "weaker" gender (Gergen, 1988; Gilligan, 1982; Lerner, 1986; Mies, 1989; Sands & Richardson, 1986; Sherif, 1987; Twombly, 1991; Westkott, 1979; Young-Eisendrath, 1988).

In an attempt to correct the inadequacies and inaccuracies of traditional theories, relationship models of women's development have emerged from contemporary research on women. These conceptualizations shed light on women's development, particularly in adulthood, by emphasizing

attachment and relationship as a different but not inferior "voice" (Gilligan, 1982) with which women "speak" throughout their lives. Valuing social interaction and personal relationships characterizes girls and women across the lifespan. In contrast, separation and individuation are critical developmental issues for boys and men, particularly during adolescence when these issues are closely tied to male gender identity (Chodorow, 1974). Feminine identity is not defined by achievement of separation so much as by the ability to care. By ignoring ongoing attachment and failing to emphasize the importance of affiliative relationship and interdependence as important paths to maturity, these theorists assert that many models of adult development provide an unrealistic view of this phase of the lifespan (Gilligan, 1982; Peck, 1986).

Midlife and Menopause

Despite current research on women's development, a comprehensive view of the midlife experience does not yet exist (Roberts & Newton, 1987). In recent years, a profusion of popular literature has emerged that is targeted toward the generation of "baby boomers" who are moving through middle adulthood and beyond. A great deal of this literature has been targeted toward the experience of menopause. Of the publications concerned with midlife women, Menopause and Midlife (Wells & Wells, 1990), Choice Years (Paige & Gordon,

1991), The Change (Greer, 1992), The Silent Passage: Menopause (Sheehy, 1992), and The Late Show (Brown, 1993) are among those which have achieved notable sales records and significant media attention. The overemphasis of the experience of menopause in these works suggests it is the most critical component of the middle adulthood years for women.

In addition to its increasing frequency in popular literature, the subject of menopause also dominates the medical literature (DeLorey, 1984). Yet, a growing body of research argues that the experiences occurring in middle adulthood are not closely related to menopause (Parlee, 1984) and that menopause is not the most important issue in midlife (DeLorey, 1981, 1984).

> The time has surely come when investigators studying middle-aged women can respond to the implicit or explicit query "But what about menopause?" with "What ABOUT menopause?". And let it go at that.
>
> (Parlee, 1984, p. 311)

Attempts to link women's lives mainly to their biology have been common, particularly in the connection of menopause and midlife distress in women. But tying women's development to her reproductive functioning at any point in the lifespan, particularly in the adult years, is both inadequate and inaccurate (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983).

There is a growing awareness that ideas concerning the experience of menopause as a negative event are not accurate and have obscured our understanding of the totality of women's

lives in midlife. In her 1945 Psychology of Women, Helene Deutsch epitomized the prevailing view by characterizing menopause as a time when "woman has ended her existence as a bearer of a new future, and has reached her natural end - partial death - as a servant of the species" (volume 2, p. 459).

In the past, childbearing was particularly important for women since most women attained their social status from their role as mother. The psychological impact of the "closing of the gates" (Deutsch, 1945) of reproduction may have been substantial. However, historical and social changes in the role of women have meant that the end of childbearing is likely a conscious decision made by women before midlife (Luria & Meade, 1984) and that menopause is not a psychologically disruptive event in their lives (Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983; Neugarten, Wood, Kraines & Loomis, 1968).

An overemphasis on negative images of midlife has arisen from the excessive and unwarranted attention that has been given to the experiences of both menopause and "the empty nest" (Baruch & Brooks-Gunn, 1984; Rubin, 1979). Critics not only denounce the primary focus that early research has placed on women in their reproductive role but also the failure to consider these events as either neutral or quite positive occurrences in women's lives (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Baruch, 1984; Long & Porter, 1984; Luria & Meade, 1984;

Rubin, 1979).

Images of Midlife

Studies of the midlife period reflect the limitations and problems of research design and biased samples found in the adult development field as a whole. As a result, there are varying images of midlife (Hunter & Sundel, 1989).

Stage theorists characterize the midlife period in a number of similar ways. Midlife is viewed as a reflective time when adults demonstrate greater self-awareness and a search for self-fulfillment. Due to the increased focus on the pressure of time left in life and a greater awareness of one's own mortality, midlife is portrayed as a time when adults become especially concerned with their contribution to future generations (Erikson, 1950; Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, 1986; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Loevinger, 1976; Vaillant, 1977). Significant developmental challenges in midlife include coping with illness or death of a parent, marital issues and family relationships (Gould, 1978; Vaillant, 1977).

Baruch and Barnett (1978) frame women's development within the life events model. They identify two components to well-being in midlife: mastery, defined as self-esteem and a sense of competence, and pleasure, a sense of satisfaction, optimism and happiness. They conclude age has no relationship to well-being because mastery and pleasure do not decline as

a woman gets older. On the contrary, the middle adult years are often better than the earlier ones for many women. In addition, no particular lifestyle insures a perpetual sense of well-being in midlife women.

A striking portion of research on adult development portrays midlife as a phase of the life cycle marked by depression and a sense of declining status (Gould, 1978; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Vaillant, 1977), particularly among women (Broschart, 1977; Crowe, 1987). The popular press and media term this middle adulthood experience as "midlife crisis" and it is widely accepted as fact (McCrae and Costa, 1984).

Many adult development researchers question whether such a midlife crisis really exists or whether it is exclusively or inevitably a midlife event (Haan, 1985; Harris, Ellicot & Holmes, 1986; Johnston & Page, 1989; Roberts & Newton, 1987). Conflicting views on the experience of midlife crisis occur, in part, because interpretations of the exact meaning of "crisis" vary among researchers.

Stage theories present conflicting points of view regarding midlife crisis. Levinson and colleagues suggest the great majority of midlife men experience a "tumultuous struggle with the self and the outside world" (1978, p. 199). Levinson concludes the crisis experience is not only a normal part of the midlife period but for all eras in the adult years which are "frequently times of crisis - of profound inner

conflict" (1978, p. 51).

Although Gould (1978) describes a turbulent midlife period in his adult transformations, he also points to the challenges to emotional security that occur in each adult developmental stage. Vaillant speaks of "the pain of the forties" (1977, p. 220) but also identifies difficult developmental issues in both earlier and later adulthood. In addition, he points to the increased use of mature coping mechanisms up to the midlife period which provides adults with assistance in dealing with the conflicts of this period. Loevinger's research (1976) credits the midlife adult with the ability to cope with conflict which, she stated, also exists at earlier stages of development.

Hoff (1989) distinguishes between the anthropologic concept of life crises as normal developmental transitions and the concept of crisis used by clinicians that emphasizes acute emotional upset in response to traumatic events. She argues that the midlife years are not as "hazardous" as popular stereotypes suggest.

Among life events theorists, Baruch, Barnett and Rivers (1983) found midlife crises or upheavals are rare in the lives of the women they studied. They concluded "if the study of midlife had begun with women, perhaps the midlife crisis would never have become part of our vocabulary!" (1983, p. 293).

Adult development has provided a limited view of the midlife experience, particularly in the lives of women. Due

to faulty assumptions and biases, lifespan studies have often failed to acknowledge the experience of women or to include a diverse population of women who differ in economic situation, sexual orientation, reproductive status, race and ethnicity (Reinharz, 1992).

In order to provide a clearer view of women's midlife development than any current conceptualization, this study was designed to explore the decades between ages 40 and 60 through interviews with a diverse group of women. The participants' open-ended descriptions of their personal circumstances, thoughts and feelings at their individual points along the midway will shed light on the midlife experience of contemporary women.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study was guided by the principal research question: "What is the midlife experience of contemporary women?". Based on personal interviews with women, the study was designed to depict this period of adulthood and to explore expectations of midlife and aging. This chapter describes the methodology used for the study including the operational definition of midlife, research design, selection and description of sample, instrumentation, pilot studies, data collection and data analysis.

Operational Definition of Midlife

I addressed a critical question at the beginning of the study: When does midlife begin and when does it end? Chronological age boundaries as well as nomenclature for specific lifespan periods are quite fluid and vary greatly among researchers. This is especially true of the midlife period which is also referred to as "middle adulthood", "middle years" or "middle age". These terms have been used interchangeably throughout this research study.

In addition, midlife adults tend to define their positions within the life cycle according to different life markers. Such markers include chronological age, parenting status, career events, physical changes and personal activities (Lachman, 1984). As our society becomes

increasingly age-irrelevant, individual differences exist in the timing of these life events. Cues for "clocking" or viewing themselves in midlife are not always the same among adults (Neugarten & Datan, 1974).

Recognizing that chronological age boundaries for developmental periods have limitations, for the purpose of this study I chose the age range of 40 to 60 years as the midlife period. The choice was influenced by the frequent reference to this age range as midlife in developmental research (Berger, 1988; Luria & Meade, 1984; Levinson, 1978). In defining age boundaries and considering the adult years to extend from their "legal" beginning at age 21 to an average life expectancy of approximately 78 years (Weg, 1992), I chose the years 40 to 60 for the midlife period because they fell within the mathematical middle point of adulthood.

Research Design

I selected personal interviewing of women as the most effective approach to investigating the developmental period of midlife because of its flexibility and opportunity for in-depth, open-ended comments and responses. The personal interview seemed a logical approach to exploring the midlife experience with a variety of women in their diverse personal contexts (Anderson, Armitage, Jack & Wittner, 1990; Sherif, 1987). This format allowed the research participants to express their own ideas in an open-ended manner and empowered

each respondent to speak in her own "voice" to tell her midlife "story" in her own terms from the context of her own experience (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Hoff, 1990; Mishler, 1986).

Selection of Sample

Due to the nature of the principal research question guiding this study - What is the midlife experience of contemporary women? - I identified gender and age as two principal characteristics in the selection of participants. Serious consideration was given to the issue of diversity as raised by contemporary scholars who affirm the importance of diversified samples of women (Geiger, 1986; Reinharz, 1992). Conscious of the problems of exclusion that frequently afflict developmental research, I selected a purposive sample of midlife women, that is, a sample that deliberately included participants with a diversity of race, income level, sexual orientation, and marital, parental and employment status.

The sample consisted of 22 women between the ages of 40 and 60. At the time of the research, they lived in 10 cities and towns in the greater Boston area including Newton, Brookline, Roxbury, Framingham, Natick, Wayland, Waltham, Brighton, Uxbridge and Dedham. This geographic area was both convenient and familiar, factors that facilitated my access to a personal and professional network in order to secure the appropriate participants for the purposive sample for this

research.

Selection of women in the sample was accomplished in several ways. Half were volunteers who had indicated interest in participation in research on midlife. As members of the audience at programs on women and aging I presented from 1989 to 1993, they signed lists from which volunteers for this study would be chosen. Of 46 volunteers from these lists, 29 met the age requirements, and 12 of this 29 lived in the greater Boston area, which met the geographic requirement. These 12 women were contacted by telephone for the first series of interviews based on age and marital status. All 12 agreed to be interviewed.

The second series of interviews resulted from a "snowball" strategy in which the women who had been interviewed in the first group of volunteers were asked to suggest other women as potential interviewees. This collaboration led to a diverse sample of seven more women from the greater Boston area who were contacted by mail (Appendix A: Introductory Letter to Participants) with follow-up by telephone. Each of these seven women agreed to participate.

After analysis of the total sample of women interviewed in the first and second round of data gathering, the need for more representation of low income women in my purposive sample was evident. I sought assistance from several church and social organizations which were familiar to me to identify possible participants. Issues of confidentiality made this a

difficult task as directors of these organizations were unwilling to disclose clients' names. With assistance from two public service councils recommended by participants, six women were contacted. Three declined to be interviewed because they felt it was an invasion of their privacy; three others agreed to be interviewed for the study.

Description of Sample

The sample was age stratified so that half the women were 40-49 years of age and half were 50-60. Six participants were between 40 and 44 and five were between 45 and 49. Six were 50 to 54 and five were 55 to 60 years old. The sample differed in sexual orientation as well as marital and parenting status. Nine women were married, five never married, and five divorced. One was widowed and two were unmarried but living with a female partner. Ten women had children and 12 did not. Nineteen women described themselves as relating sexually only to men, two as relating only to women and one as relating to men and women but preferring women. Two women did not complete high school. Of the 20 who completed high school, 15 women completed college or graduate school programs.

Four women were unemployed at the time of the interview. Eighteen interviewees were employed and their occupations varied: teacher, social worker, nurse, child care provider, personal companion, house cleaner, food service worker,

student, secretary and administrative assistant. One participant was a Roman Catholic nun. Most women had been working full-time for 6 to 30 years.

Personal incomes for the sample ranged from less than $10,000 to over $40,000 per year, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Annual Personal Income

Annual income	Number of women
less than $10,000	4
$10,000 - $20,000	6
$20,000 - $30,000	4
$30,000 - $40,000	4
more than $40,000	4

Twelve women, all of whom were divorced or never married, were sole supports for themselves or their households. Their annual incomes are shown in Table 2.

Ten women had financial support in addition to their personal incomes as a result of being married, living in a relationship with another woman, or the recipient of church subsidizing. For these women, total family income or household income ranged from less than $10,000 to over $70,000 per year in the sample, as shown in Table 3.

Thirteen of the 22 women were Caucasian. Three participants were Latina and four were African Americans. One member of the sample was Chinese and another Asian Indian.

Table 2

Annual Income for Sole Household Supports

Annual income	Number of women
less than $10,000	3
$10,000 - $20,000	4
$20,000 - $30,000	0
$30,000 - $40,000	1
more than $40,000	4

Table 3

Annual Income for Shared Household Support

Annual household income	Number of women
$10,000 - $20,000	1
$20,000 - $30,000	0
$30,000 - $40,000	2
$40,000 - $50,000	3
$50,000 - $60,000	0
$60,000 - $70,000	2
more than $70,000	2

Instrumentation

The semi-structured tape-recorded interviews consisted of a core of predetermined questions (Appendix C: Interview Questions) in a three-part questionnaire including:

Part I. Personal Information,

Part II. Expectations of Midlife and Aging,

Part III. The Midlife Years.

In order to determine whether each question in the interview was clear and understandable, the instrument was pre-tested with four women between the ages of 40 and 60. Minor revisions in vocabulary and phrasing of the questions were made based on the suggestions of these women.

The revised interview instrument was pre-tested with three different midlife women. No further revisions were made based on pre-testing feedback.

Pilot Studies

Revisions were made to the interview instrument as a result of three pilot studies. Three trial interviews conducted in June, 1993 served as pilot studies prior to commencement of the full interview process for this research. The participants met the study sample selection requirements of age and geographic location. Since the pilot studies proved to be successful, they were incorporated as the first 3 of the 22 interviews for the study.

The original design of the interview instrument was modified as a result of the pilot studies. Three questions from Part III - The Midlife Years, were deleted from the format. One change in the original instrument was the elimination of the question "What part of your midlife experience stands out as most important to you?". Each woman

in the pilot interviews stated that their midlife experience was far too complex to choose any single component as more critical than any other. I accepted their position that the question reflected an inaccurate assumption that midlife could be characterized in terms such as "most" and "least".

Two other questions, "Is your life fuller or more rewarding now than in the years before 40?" and "Is your life any less enjoyable or more difficult now than in the years before you were 40?", were also eliminated. In each pilot interview, the responses to these questions were included as part of the answers to three other questions in this section including "How would you describe your life right now?", "Are there advantages or benefits to being the age you are right now?" and "Are there disadvantages or difficulties in being the age you are right now?". The pilot study participants unanimously agreed that the "fuller" and "less enjoyable" questions seemed redundant. They were eliminated from the interview instrument.

Data Collection

In conducting the interviews, each participant was informed that the purpose of the study was to explore the many dimensions of women's development. Since each woman was curious about the questions that would be posed during the interview, I suggested she think about how she would describe her life at her present age.

I conducted the interviews from June through October, 1993. Each participant chose the most convenient time and location for her interview. While most chose to be interviewed in their own home, several participants opted to meet at their work site or in my home or office.

Prior to her interview, each woman signed an informed consent form (Appendix B: Consent Form). The consent agreement assured her confidentiality would be maintained in the research and dissemination of the data generated by the study through use of code names and numbers.

Each interview was tape recorded. At the conclusion of each session, which lasted from one to two hours, each participant was paid a stipend of $25.00. Funding for the stipends was provided by a doctoral research grant from Lesley College.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the tape recorded interviews, I read the transcriptions to become familiar with the content. During subsequent analytical readings, the probes used in the interview instrument were employed as codes for organizing the data. Clusters of codes became themes for further data analysis, presentation and discussion of the findings in this research. The themes included fulfillment vs. crisis, sense of self, physical well-being, relationships, spirituality and community, and satisfaction with life choices.

Chapter 4: Expectations of Midlife and Aging

As a woman turning 40 in 1989, I was puzzled by the conflicting attitudes and images about the "magic age" that I had observed on the threshold of my own entrance into midlife. The positive images from my personal experience and my observations of midlife women led me to expect a fulfilling time of life. Yet my optimistic perspective seemed at odds with negative images from popular culture and the viewpoints of others, particularly those younger than I. This curiosity about the midlife experience of women laid the foundation upon which this study was constructed. My central question was a straightforward one: What <u>is</u> the midlife experience of contemporary American woman? I wanted to hear midlife women's descriptions of their lives at their particular point in the midlife decades from age 40 to 60.

While my curiosity centered on what the midlife experience <u>is</u>, it extended to what contemporary midlife women <u>expected</u> it would be as younger women. In pondering the personal experiences and sociocultural forces that shape women's ideas about midlife and aging, secondary but related questions emerged: As younger adults, did midlife women have expectations about what life will be like after age 40? What influences women's expectations of midlife? As midlife women, what are their anticipations of aging? What influences those ideas?

In my interviews with 22 midlife women, I explored their expectations of midlife first. After obtaining descriptive information from each woman in the study, I asked her to reflect on the years before age 40 and to describe what she envisioned her life would be at her current age and what shaped those ideas. After each woman described her expectations of midlife, I asked her to picture herself in her mind's eye 10 years older than her present age and describe that mental picture and how she felt about it. The following represents the expectations of midlife and aging described by the 22 study participants.

Expectations of Midlife

In response to my request to describe their expectations of midlife, three women replied that, as younger adults, they never really thought about what their lives would be like in their fourth or fifth decades. Their responses indicated a similarity between women's experiences in early adulthood and those reported by Daniel Levinson and his associates (1978) in their studies of adult men. The activities involved in entering and settling into early adulthood are the primary preoccupation of young people in their 20s. These three respondents pointed to their intense involvement and focus on the day to day activities of early and middle adulthood as reasons for never contemplating the future. As one explained:

> I was too busy. You just take one day at a time then. You don't look too far ahead of you.

> Working. Kids. Always something happening - go to school, buy a house, the kids coming.

Having experienced the deaths of family members who were 40 or 50 years of age, two women were convinced they would not live long enough to reach midlife and never speculated about life beyond the present. One explained:

> I had no expectations. My mother's stroke became the defining point where I really looked back on my life before that and was amazed to see that each day just came with no longterm plans for anything, career, personal. As to why that was, I think it was a certain Irish fatalism. I truly believed for a long time I was so linked to my Aunt Margaret who died when she was around 50. I truly believed I wasn't going to live past 50. In our whole family, there hasn't been longevity....Why think about it?

The majority of women had clear expectations of what their midlife would be like. Consistent with Greenwood's (1989) assertions regarding ideas about aging, their anticipation of the midlife years was significantly influenced by the experiences and observations in the family as well the expectations held for them within that circle in their early years.

One participant, married and the mother of two children, described her vision of middle adulthood as an adolescent. She expected to be single and to live alone as a self-supporting career woman.

> As a teenager, I expected to be single. I didn't expect to be married. I sort of prepared myself to live by myself. And I thought I'd be working in a field with people and be a career person. Personally, I always thought I'd be athletic, strong, physically active. I guess I thought I'd be involved politically, socially. They were interests that were starting to develop in college.

The sociocultural setting in which they lived (Bourbieux, 1980) as teenagers and young adults growing up in the 1950s, '60s and early '70s affected many women's expectations of midlife. In keeping with society's ideas about "a woman's place" as that of wife and mother (Bobo, 1987; Hymowitz & Weissman, 1978; Lopata & Barnewolt, 1984), most participants said they saw the marriage and family options as the only socially acceptable ones open to them as they approached early adulthood. Many described identical expectations of midlife that included lifelong marriage to the same man, children, and a home of their own. A 40-year-old woman said it plainly:

> I'd be married. House. Dog. Children. Married to a man like my father, making a decent living. I saw nothing else.

While expectations for women in the 1950s and '60s included the role of wife and mother, society also encouraged men to measure their masculinity in terms of their ability to financially support a wife and children (Hymowitz & Weissman, 1978). Of those women who anticipated marriage and family, many also envisioned husbands who would provide full or significant financial support for them for the rest of their life. One explained:

> I probably expected to be dependent upon a husband, being brought up in a family situation where my mother stayed home and my father took care of everything. I probably expected the same thing even though I went to college to get a degree for a job.

Others envisioned a career that would allow them to share financial responsibility for home and family. A 53 year old

described how she was influenced by the 1950s' view of acceptable "women's fields" for those who wished to pursue a career. Those occupations focused primarily on service to others and included teaching, nursing, social work, fashion merchandising and retailing, as reported by Hymowitz and Weissman (1978). She said:

> I expected that I would have children, be married to the same person forever....I think it came from my environment and being a product of the '50s. I did not go to school beyond high school, although I could have. Girls going to school could only be a nurse or a teacher. I didn't want to be a nurse or a teacher, so what else could I possibly be? So I said "What the heck, I'll get a job. I'll get married, I'll have a baby." That's what the expectations were in the '50s.

Two respondents, both lesbians who had ended their marriage or engagement while in their 20s, acknowledged their early expectations of midlife included marriage to a man even though each is currently in a long-term lesbian relationship. As adolescents and young adults in a time prior to the second wave of the Women's Movement, they were influenced by social expectations for women that dictated the role of wife and mother. These lesbian women came of age in a homophobic society that listed homosexuality as a crime in many states and viewed any deviation from heterosexual relationships as an abnormal rejection of traditional female roles, as Hymowitz and Weissman (1978) point out. A 44 year old lesbian related her story:

> I got married at a young age to get out of the house...I had no options at that point. Girls didn't just go and set up apartments in 1967. ...I

> had had some intense relationships with young girls who were my peers while I was an adolescent. I thought I would grow out of it...I didn't see lesbians walking around on the street. So when I was married, I figured I'd be married forever though I didn't have the intensity of feeling... When we broke up, I was straight. I dated. But I was very intrigued by women, and I knew that if I could find the strength, I could live like that. But it didn't seem like a viable alternative...But times were changing in the early '70s. I met some contacts, made some changes and started going to Greenwich Village. Then I decided I was a lesbian. I came out quickly and I never looked back! And I felt a huge relief, because it always felt like I was in conflict and I thought my life was going to be miserable. And people had a million expectations for me - wear a bra, wear make-up, wear heels - there were just a million things that I felt I was fighting constantly. And then there was this whole new way to live. It was kind of like throwing all that shit in one bucket and saying "Here take it all back. I'm not part of your world".

Thus, despite their socioeconomic and ethnic differences and variation in marital and parenting status and sexual orientation, many participants answered the question "Looking back to the years before age 40, what did you expect your midlife to be like?" in similar ways. Their anticipations of husband, home and children were a composite of their family experience as well as the perceptions of social acceptability in their adolescent and early adult years.

Expectations of Aging

I became curious about expectations of aging after reading "The Double Standard of Aging" in which Susan Sontag addressed the subject in a discouraging manner in her discussion of American society's different perceptions of

aging men and women in the early 1970s. She portrayed the expectations of aging in the following manner:

> The prestige of youth affects everyone...In an era in which people actually live longer and longer, what now amounts to the latter two-thirds of everyone's life is shadowed by a poignant apprehension of unremitting loss (1972, p. 29).

In Ourselves, Growing Older (Doress & Siegel, 1987), published 15 years after Sontag's article, the authors discussed the same glorification of youth and the ageist and sexist attitudes that devalue aging women in our culture:

> In a youth-oriented society, both middle-aged and older women struggle with ageism...We live in a society that values the quick fix and the slick package (p. xxii).

Since negative and often erroneous images of older people, particularly women, still abound in United States culture (Barrow, 1986; Nadelson, 1990; Palmore, 1990; Sheppard, 1990), do these perceptions affect midlife women's expectations of aging? Are they apprehensive about becoming older? What is their anticipation of the future?

In response to my request that each woman picture herself in her mind's eye 10 years older than her present age and describe that mental image and how she felt about it, nine participants described an awareness of negative messages about women and aging, particularly in the media. They described their experience of subtle innuendos as well as blatant stereotypes of aging as harrowing. Consistent with Wolf's assertions in The Beauty Myth (1991), they commented upon the advertising industry's celebration of youth and emphasis on

the importance of youthful appearance as defined by wrinkle-free skin, a slim shapely body, and hair unmarred by greying.

Although research suggests that negative images or messages influence a younger population's attitude about aging and older people (Levin, 1988; Luszcz, 1986), this did not appear to be true for all midlife women. Of the nine women who were aware of negative external messages, seven lamented this relentless accentuation of youth but said it had no influence on their expectations of aging. The other two said their expectations of aging were somewhat affected by the negative images of aging women in society. One woman called attention to society's double standard of aging (Doress & Siegel, 1987; Sontag, 1972; Wolf, 1992) in a resentful manner:

> I think society in general has a double standard for women. You can see it in the media still, even though every now and then they'll do a little feature, like on women at 50 now. But for the most part in the media, you can look at anchor people. They have an anchor man who is older and might have wrinkles and they're fine. But it's different for women. Also in body images - the image for women is always younger and the message is that you have to change it in order to attain the right body image.

Another participant added:

> I think it's sad. I think it's such a shame that we've done this in our society. That we don't respect age. And the whole thing with men. Men get older and they get more handsome. Women get older and pll-ttt!

Two women reported these societal influences did affect their own attitudes about aging. One described her

exasperation in confronting the affects of these external messages in her midlife, particularly those in advertising, illustrating Wolf's (1992) conclusions about the persuasive power of that component of the media. This respondent said:

> This summer for the first time I was trying not to get a lot of sun on my face. I noticed three age spots. I've already gone through three jars of whatever it is, estrogen or some kind of cream. I buy it but I can't bring myself to use it. It makes me angry that I have to try to look a certain way. But then I get uptight and think oh, God, if I don't take care of these now I'll be covered with them. That's a surprise. I don't feel like I should have age spots. I really feel young. I don't want to have grey hair, because I feel it will limit who I am. If I have grey hair, I'm not going to be able to get away with anything! That's a choice for me!

Research suggests that health care providers are subject to the same biases, lack of information and misinformation about women and aging as the general population of the larger society. A negative attitude can be reflected in their views and can affect their ability to communicate effectively and provide appropriate services to midlife women (DeLorey, 1984; Doress & Siegel, 1987; Porcino, 1991). Three participants confirmed these findings as they described health care professionals whose comments and tone of voice characterized midlife and aging as a time to expect physical decline and possible deterioration of health. One woman described her troubling encounter with a physician's assistant:

> I went to get a check up. I don't know if this is societal, but there are some undercurrents there. I hadn't been to the doctor in two years. In my mind it was a routine kind of thing. When the woman came into the doctor's office she said to me

> "Well, you know, you're in midlife and you need to..." and she goes down the list of things that I should be doing - eating, everything. I remember I got so frightened! It was so overwhelming to me! I was discombobulated for the whole day...What I found out later is she was my exact same age! I'd never really thought about aging as something to worry about. You just get better at living by doing it. I have to say I'm still coming out of that.

All midlife women cited the aging experience of those people closest to them as the most significant influence on their anticipation of the future. They described the observation of mothers, grandmothers, aunts, friends and associates as influences on their ideas about aging, experiences noted by Greenwood (1989) who described the influence of women's observation of their mothers and other family members on their views of aging. For many participants, the observations served as a positive model; for others, it was a negative one.

Many midlife women found a positive model of aging in their mothers who were vital happy women well into their 60s, 70s and 80s. These participants envisioned their own aging as similar to what they had observed and eagerly embraced the visualization as part of their future:

> I see my mother now. I like my mother. She's a joy to be with. And that goes back to her mother. My grandmother. I used to love to visit her. Her philosophy was there's always something new to learn every day. She was very alert....Here she was confined to a chair, in front of a window. Yet you went into that little room and your heart would open up and you would feel joyful. This woman made you glad that you were alive! My mother has inherited that. I love being with her because she's such a kid. I want to be like that!

> The people with the most influence are my family. Both sides are long livers.... Long livers. Very healthy and active to the end. My mother, to this day, is far more involved, engaged, active in the world around her than I am! She's very involved in our church and clubs. Even when we were kids, she did a lot of that, not as much as now. I can't hold a candle to her in terms of that life accomplishment.

For five participants, appraisal of their mother's middle adulthood and later years was influential but served as a negative model for aging in some way. They cited specific aspects of their parent's adulthood and aging that were troubling to them and that they would attempt to avoid in their own lives. A divorced mother of a preschool child described her mother, a woman in her 60s, as very depressed. Encouraged by the result of recent personal therapy, this participant confidently stated that her own aging would not mirror her mother:

> My ideas about aging come from looking at my mother. I love my mother. She's a very depressed woman, very isolated. My voice is different than what I see. I don't feel that I'll be a depressed woman.

A lesbian woman was especially passionate in her statement about her mother as a model of what she did not want to be like:

> My mother was quite young when I was born. She was 17, and we've been alienated for a long time so I never really saw her get older. In some ways, every expectation that she had I didn't meet. How I should act, make-up, clothes, interactions with boys, having babies. Her idea of what my life should be like is so diametrically opposed to the way it really came out that I never looked to her to see what I might be like because she wasn't a model of what I <u>wanted</u> to be like, including aging!

A 44 year old described her mother's midlife death over 20 years ago as a memory that clouds the anticipation of her own future.

> My mother committed suicide and I often wonder if it was because we were out of the house and she had nothing else in her life. She didn't work. Her father had passed away and he used to live with the family. There was one void in her life. My brother lived out of state. I was married.

Yet the same woman looked to the example of her now deceased aunts as a somewhat more positive influence on her expectations of aging. She said:

> I would have to say that my two older aunts influenced me. They had wonderful lives. Almost right up to their deaths in their 80s and 90s. Neither one married so they had each other and they did things together.

Interactions with older adults encouraged several midlife women to look forward to aging with a positive attitude. In exploring perceptions of aging, Horn and Meer (1987) point to the increase in the number of older people in society and the ways in which they differ from negative and often erroneous stereotypes of the elderly. Such images portray them as sick, sedentary, sexless, senile, impoverished, and unable to care for themselves (Davis, 1990; Fielding, 1984; Palmore, 1990). Midlife women whose expectations of aging were optimistic confirm the findings of Horn and Meer (1987) that positive perceptions of older adults lead to a better understanding and encouraging anticipation of aging.

Three women described their interactions with older people enthusiastically. A 51 year old cited the personal

growth she's observed in a friend who is 60 as an influence on her own ideas about aging.

> She's 60! I think she is fantastic and more of a person now than she was 25 years ago. I've known her that long. She's evolved incredibly. To me, 60 looks great!

The same woman, whose mother resides in a convalescent home, also described the influence her association with older people has had on her expectations of aging.

> I still say 60 to 70 is a viable time. You have to understand that I spend an incredible amount of time with people who are in their 80s and 90s. There are people in the nursing home who talk about their sons and daughters and they're in their 70s. There are wonderful role models for people in their 90s at the nursing home. Delightful people. I'd rather spend time with them than with people a lot younger!

A 49 year old reinforced this message as she described her lifelong association with older people as a contribution to her perspective on aging:

> All of the time, my friends, even when I was little, have always been older than me. Older people. My very best friend will be 60 next year. ...I had a friend who, at 35, had white hair and I wanted to have hair like hers. Aging did not scare me at all.

Vibrancy and involvement in life were the two attributes cited most often in the participants' impressions of aging gleaned from older role models:

> I think I can look at some older women and say I'd like to be like that at their age. Vibrant, healthy, active, involved.

> I was always like "I don't buy this shit that women have to be young!". That was part of the lesbian thing, too. I just loved this professor that I had in college. She was absolutely great and she was

50 then!

Cultural differences in attitudes toward aging contribute to the image of aging women in any society (Amoss & Harrell, 1981; Bourbieux, 1980). One woman, born and raised in Taiwan, referred to her culture's influence as highly significant in her perspective on aging. She stated:

> In my culture, getting old has a lot of advantages. People respect you. I remember my grandparents. When we had dinner, they would always get the best part. Whatever we had in the family, you would think of them always because you respected them. A woman doesn't have any position when they are young. When they become a mother and later, they have more position. When you get old, you don't have to worry because you have your daughter or daughter-in-law and her children to take care of you. Especially if you have a good husband who provides a good income, your status increases even more.

Born and raised in India until college age, another woman expressed very strong feelings about aging as well as a view of that culture's definition of fulfillment of one's lifetime responsibilities.

> Well, the only thing I really think about is that I just want to see my children grow up and, you know, be there until they get married or something. I really don't think...I feel that once you are 70 then there's no need to live after you have done your work. My husband doesn't agree. He feels that 70 is not old. If feel that, after that, I wouldn't mind if I died. That is my duty to raise the children. After that, it's done.

Of the 22 women interviewed, 17 visualized themselves in a positive light 10 years into the future and were comfortable with that image of themselves. Consistent with Ruth Jacobs' (1987) portrayal of older women "surviving and thriving", they

imagined themselves as older women living a full and happy life. Most women did not see themselves as fundamentally different from the woman they are now and were untroubled by the prospect of being 10 years older.

> I don't think I see myself very differently. I don't think age has that much to do with what you do...I feel comfortable because I don't see myself as being that much different.

Three participants anticipated aging with marked enthusiasm. In keeping with Jane Porcino's (1991) theme of "growing older, getting better", they expected to be living more fully and purposefully than ever before 10 years from now.

One woman, who had spent a great deal of time visiting her mother in a nursing home, found her mother's illness was the defining point where she began to think seriously about her own aging. As she looked ahead to what she would be like in 10 years at age 61 she stated:

> I want my 50s to be really great because I think I just glided through the rest of it...You cannot be around a nursing home for any extended amount of time before you really pull yourself up and say hey, wait a minute!. I have frivelled away the first 45 years...I did what I wanted and never gave a thought to what was ahead...Then it hits you and you say I've got to do everything I can to make sure that those years are going to be good ones."

A recovering alcoholic, a divorced mother of two young adults, could not depict specific details about the woman she would be in 10 years except that she would be "incredibly independent". She described her feelings about the prospect of aging as

> Positive in almost every way...I'm not sure what she'll be like, but, whatever it is, she'll be okay...I am confident because I am in recovery. I am living the twelve steps and that makes it good and okay.

Contrary to the fact that 17 women were unperturbed by the anticipation of aging, 5 women were troubled to varying degrees by the prospect of thinking about themselves 10 years from now. Their apprehensions were focused on some aspect of their relationship to other people or the presence of others in their lives, confirming the research done by Chodorow (1974) and Gilligan (1982) that points to the critical importance of relationship to others in the lives of women across the lifespan. Apprehensions about divorce, separation or lack of an intimate relationship with another person in the future cast a negative or troubling light on several women's anticipation of aging.

Two women, experiencing serious difficulties in their marriage, suggested their husbands would not be part of the future picture. The first gave a long, deep sigh and revealed:

> ...adjusting to that whole thing about the kids being gone and then I'm stuck with just my husband and me. Good grief, that's going to be a real adjustment.

After a long exhale of breath, the second added financial insecurity to her troubled view of the future:

> Whew.....oh, gosh. It's scary. We have a tremendous amount of financial insecurity - and I mean REAL!.. It really colors that picture down the road...I'm by myself. I'd like to be. That's the other thing about growing up. My husband will

> never leave me. But I could leave him. Our relationship is not really good.

Having lived without a mate or male companion for many years, one divorced participant found it difficult to contemplate her future in 10 years because she feared she would still be alone.

> It's really hard for me to think of the future because I want more than I have now. I guess I would really like to have a relationship. It doesn't have to be a grand love affair, but companionship - there to care for you. I hate to think the next 10 or 20 years is going to be as difficult and sometimes lonely, even having kids, without an adult companion...I think what I'm most fearful of is being alone for the rest of my life...It's scary to look down the road.

A widow also described her fear of being alone 10 years into the future.

> I'm still feeling so lost. It's hard to look down the road, no matter what people tell me about time and healing. I've never wanted to be alone. I hate it and I'm so afraid that maybe I'll be alone in that picture of me 10 years from now.

One participant, never married, stated she was generally comfortable with the image of herself 10 years in the future as a 61 year old woman. However, she described her concerns about the loss of a personal support system in anticipating what her life might be like then.

> The only misgiving or source of concern that I have is my support system, which mainly at this point consists of my mother since my father passed away years ago, may not be there. And not having married to form my own family, I still see myself very much in terms of my primary family....When my father passed away years ago, I was forced for the first time in my life to come to terms and see myself in another context. I was about 43 years old then.

In addition to the concern for continued or renewed connection to others in the decade to come, half the women either prefaced or concluded their description of their mental image of themselves as an older women with their hope for good health. These aspirations dispute Bearon's (1989) research on life satisfaction which concludes that midlife women value achievements and acquisitions while good health is valued more by older women than those who are middle aged. Each of the midlife women in this research mentioned physical wellness and vitality as an important component of their image of the future. They commented:

> I see a retired, happy, active woman. I don't see anything negative about being 63, as long as I feel okay.

> On a practical level, I don't see much change in my lifestyle from now. I hope that I'll still be in good health, which will be a big factor.

In summary, 5 of the 22 women in this study were bothered by the prospect of growing old. Their apprehensions were centered on the various aspects of relationship to others and concerns about the possible deterioration of their health.

The expectations of aging expressed by 17 of the 22 midlife women in this study indicated untroubled anticipation of the future. These findings contradict the persistent stereotype that women view aging with fear and dread. Positive role models of aging provided by family members, friends and associates contributed to a comfortable vision of themselves as older women.

A 44 year old African American reflected the recurring theme of midlife women's expectations of aging in her description of what she anticipates at age 60 and beyond:

> It's funny. I wrote this piece in the first year of the Ed School at Christmas time. We have a group of friends and we exchange gifts and that year the money was zilch. So I wrote this piece called "In Praise of Friends". In it I said I can see us all at 60. Talking loud, laughing frivolously, and stepping on. In many ways, I think I'll be, in spirit, much the same as I am now. I know that, physically, things change when you get older, so in that capacity there'll be things I have to contend with....I look forward to getting older because I love living and, to me, if you like being alive then you have to like getting older. One comes with the other. That's the reality.

The reality. What <u>is</u> the reality of the midlife experience? Having explored the expectations of midlife that women held as younger adults and their anticipation of aging, I moved to the heart of the research: a portrayal of the midlife experience provided by midlife women themselves.

Chapter 5: Descriptions of the Midlife Years

After each woman described her expectations of midlife and aging, I asked her to describe her life at her present age. In the portrayal of their midlife experience, the participants consistently described similar facets of their lives and personal development. This chapter presents the descriptions the midlife experience and details each of the recurrent themes of the participants' midlife "stories", including:

- fulfillment vs. crisis
- sense of self
- physical well-being
- relationships
- spirituality and community
- satisfaction with life choices.

Fulfillment vs. Crisis

Despite past or present stressful or challenging circumstances in their lives, most women used descriptors such as happy, full, nice, good, content, even-keeled, and fulfilled in their depictions of the midlife experience. The women's theme of midlife as a fulfilling time in adulthood echoed that of research conducted by Baruch, Barnett and Rivers (1983), Doress and Siegel (1987), Porcino (1991) and Rubin (1979). Their comments included:

> I think my life is very fulfilled because I designed what I wanted to do. I love my life. I love living. I love being a teacher. I love my home and friends.
>
> I guess the thing that probably is most characteristic is settling in. I am comfortable in my body. I am comfortable with myself. It's like the old shoes that are so comfortable.

All participants expressed satisfaction with some aspect of their lives. However, since employment is linked to self-esteem and midlife satisfaction, according to Coleman, Antonucci, Adelmann and Crohan (1987), it is not surprising that two women, unemployed at the time of their interview, offered a somewhat disillusioned side to the picture of their midlife.

> I'm disappointed in where I'm at and at how much I've not done.
>
> Unsettled! I haven't quite found my niche and I think I should've by now.

Twelve women mentioned the popular term "midlife crisis" in discussing their lives. Having heard the phrase in conversations, humor, contemporary literature, and the media, they interpreted the term in a clinical manner (Hoff, 1989) as one that connotes major upheaval, serious discontent, turbulence, high anxiety, panic, or unusual changes in behavior. These participants' views that their midlife did not fit such a turbulent image of crisis illustrate Hoff's (1989) distinction between clinical crisis and normal developmental transitions which may be challenging or stressful in various ways but which "need not be nightmares"

(p.40).

Aware of the prominence of the term in popular literature and the media (McCrae & Costa, 1984), several participants were dismayed at the frequent use of midlife crisis as an expression that was inconsistent with the reality of their midlife experience. One woman was particularly annoyed with the prescriptive nature of references to midlife crisis in some of the reading she had done:

> I'm a little bit upset by some of the articles I've read, not that I've read a lot, about how it's supposed to be difficult and traumatic. It's not true for me. It seems that it doesn't necessarily have to be traumatic. I don't like being told it should be. These articles are almost prescriptive - oh, watch out, you're going to have a terrible time. Maybe I'm just being optimistic.

Although 12 women were familiar with the term, none of them felt that midlife crisis as a period of major upheaval had any significance in their lives. The same conclusion was reached by Baruch, Barnett and Rivers (1983) and Johnston and Page (1989) whose findings do not support the stereotyped view of the depressed or highly distressed midlife woman.

Several participants reported their observations that women experience a multiplicity of personal commitments and life adjustments with greater ease and "less fanfare" than men throughout their adult years and seem to have a greater capacity to accommodate and "get on with it". One woman's comment embraced the general theme of similar statements made by others:

I just think that midlife crisis has always been

> like the male menopause. Women deal with crisis all the time. I don't consider it part of my life even though I will say it in jest if I'm having a bad day.

Another said:

> I think women just go along and do and make changes and make adjustments and do what needs to be done and not make a big thing out of it and not put a label on it and say I'm suffering from this.

Yet another proposed:

> I don't think women have that life phase in the same sense that men do. Maybe it has to do with the way we are socialized. I don't think crisis - where we wake up and say "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?". I think, even if we do, if life circumstances dictate that, women are able to handle it with more grace than men.

Of 12 women who mentioned midlife crisis and disclaimed its relevance to their lives, 7 described times in their 20s and early 30s as situational crises when the expectations they had of what life would be like proved to be dramatically different from the reality of what happened. Studies of life experience and stress by Pearlin and Johnson (1977) and of midlife concerns of women by Baruch, Barnett and Rivers (1983) also suggest that young adults show the most stress and are the most displeased with their lives. For the midlife participants in this study, the early adult years of the 20s and early 30s presented life circumstances that challenged or negated their earlier expectations about marriage, parenting, family relationships, and career decisions.

Five women spoke of the situational crisis of coming to grips with the collapse of their marriage. Socialized from

childhood to marry, have children and assume family caretaker roles, they experienced a great deal of stress from divorce. As Bobo's research (1987) indicates, divorce can lead to personal and creative growth in women or loneliness, bitterness and depression. The former was true for a single mother of two children. She described the crisis of separation and divorce in her early 30s and praised it as an important turning point in her life when she became a stronger, more independent, self-sufficient woman. Her comment supports Hoff's (1989) premise that stressful events may result in a sense of mastery and achievement.

> What's really interesting is, the things that I thought were so bad at the time, turned out to be good. I was in crisis a long time ago when John started sleeping around. If I read it in a book, I would say I don't believe she doesn't know what's happening. It was so obvious, but my mind wouldn't accept it. I had a breakdown of sorts, a very severe depression. Six months. Most of what I did was to sit in front of the TV, watch commercials, and cry. I even said that I couldn't afford to give up my little part-time job, but I couldn't go to work. That was a negative at the time, but to me now, it's a positive. Because I had to totally break down in order to build a strong base.

A 51 year old African American woman, never married, related the crisis of career and personal decision-making in her 30s and contrasted it with her well-being at midlife:

> I think I've reached a point of acceptance, of reconciliation about life and about the contingencies in life that put me in a good place. There was a time earlier when I was very concerned about mating and dating. In many ways, I went through turbulence and crisis, all those decisions and redesigning myself in my late 20s, early 30s. Oh Lord, those years were the opposite from now!...That was the critical time, a defining time

in my life, if ever there was a crisis time.

A 44 year old African American reported a crisis point very early in adulthood:

> I did have a crisis but it was around 21! I was in graduate school. I had finished school. I wasn't married. And no one in my family had ever done that. I didn't have a paradigm. What do I do now? I remember that!

After listing several other crises in addition to her divorce that occurred early in adulthood, another 44 year old described her present age as a much easier time of life:

> It's not a crisis. A major upheaval. I've had so many of them in my life that there's nothing to it right now. The crises were my husband leaving, my mother's death, my grandfather's death, my father's illness and death. I think because things are basically moving on an even keel. There haven't been any major problems that I've had to overcome.

Several women described midlife with notable pride that their present satisfaction had been attained after personal struggle in earlier years. A 56 year old woman illustrated Baruch and Barnett's (1978) theory that the middle adult years, particularly the 50s (Mitchell & Helson, 1990), are often better for women than earlier ones. After describing many longterm difficulties in her marriage and personal life, she depicted her midlife as significantly better than her 20s and 30s:

> It's like a lot of elation. Like 'ohhhh'. And happiness, despite all the stresses in my life. I really feel happy!...I think some of it is that I've changed a lot so I'm responsible for that. I've changed a lot. My husband's favorite expression is "forged by fire". Of course, it's only the fire that forces you to change. Change always comes about with pain. Now, today, I don't

> feel like I mind it. It's like a double-edged sword. I don't regret having had the difficulty I had to be the person I am now!

Sense of Self

Most women commented that they were more self-confident and self-assured in midlife than ever before, supporting Baruch and Barnett's (1978) contention that self-esteem does not decline as a woman gets older. In fact, for many women, it appeared to increase in midlife along with their sense of competence. The participants attributed this to one primary reason - life experience. One participant put it quite simply by saying:

> After living this many years you feel you know better!

Two women stated that self-confidence was not only a midlife trait but also a one that had been a part of their personalities as young women. One Hispanic woman claimed:

> I haven't changed at all. My mother used to say that I had a strong head before I was born because she could never control me. That's what my father liked about me. He thought it was superbrains, but it was guts!

Another woman attributed her self-confidence to her parents as role models. She candidly explained:

> It's been pretty much continual. I've always been pretty self-assured and I've always gotten along with people....I've always been a liaison or conduit between different groups as a teacher. I was the first Black teacher in Minnesota... My parents were very self-assured people. I think their sense of self was given to me. I've never felt intimidated by people or less than people...I've never really envied people, like I

wish I had her hair or her boobs or her legs.

Having coped with a variety of personal challenges, midlife women felt confident about their ability to manage their lives competently. Not only did they report an increased level of self-confidence but a higher level of self-understanding as well, as Neugarten's (1979) research on adult development suggests. One woman said:

> I think when you're younger and making decisions about what you're going to do, everything seems much more traumatic than it does now. I think it's partly having the experience of having managed them before and things work out!

Along with marked confidence, many participants described an increased level of self-reliance in their midlife years compared to early adulthood, as found by Helson and Wink (1992). They reported their thoughts and actions were now guided by internally generated standards and beliefs as opposed to external expectations or needs of others. One woman explained:

> I don't think everything is my fault anymore. I spent years thinking that if something wasn't going the way I wanted to, then I was doing something wrong.

Most women reported that they were more "in touch" with themselves and their ideas and feelings in midlife than they were as younger women:

> I'm much more competent now. Just more self-assured, more comfortable. I was a mealy mouthed little thing. You could walk all over me. I wouldn't say you know what if I had a mouth full! I do like myself better now. Sometimes I don't like myself if I come on too strong and overstep my bounds. But for the most part I'm happier now. I

> listen to other people's opinions and I might agree with them to their face but I know my own mind and what I like and what I want and don't want.

As a result of increased self-awareness, most participants placed higher priority on their own needs in midlife than they did in early adult years. Their comments corroborated Maddy's research (1985) on women's role as nurturer which indicates that women become more assertive in the second half of life. As one woman said:

> I grow in confidence all the time. The down side to that is that I don't suffer fools gladly...Twenty years ago I would have gone along and said "oh, okay!" and always tried to make people feel good about themselves. Not anymore. I was always so conscious of people liking me, not wanting to hurt people's feelings. I simply don't care anymore! For my priorities to happen, I'm out there in your face about it!

In addition to her findings that women become more aggressive in midlife, Maddy (1985) suggests they fear their autonomy will cause them to be rejected by family and friends. A few participants confirmed those findings. Most did not. While they avoided expressing their own ideas or candid opinions as young adults, most women had changed that pattern of behavior. As a result of increased self-confidence and assessment of their own needs, midlife women placed greatest value on personal honesty in sharing their thoughts, defending their ideas and advocating for their own needs in their associations with family, friends and professional associates. One said:

> I like myself. All the things that I hated myself for back in my 30s - I'm strong, opinionated,

> uncompromising, smart. You know how women play dumb when they're in their early 20s to try to please men? I don't do that anymore! I haven't done that in years. I tell them when they're dumb and stupid and I don't have any compunction about it! The difference is that I can admit it and I'm not trying to hide it. A matter of accepting it. I would have been defensive then. I would have fights with guys about it. In those days it was like calling people unfeminine, a bitch, a Saphire. But now, that's who I am. Take it or leave it.

But three midlife women expressed regret the way in which they still repress their own ideas and needs in order to please, placate or avoid offending others. They were not as assertive as they would like to be in expressing their own needs. A Chinese woman, married and the mother of two children, said:

> I think I'm more aware now. When I was young, I worried more about what people wanted me to do. That's my weak point now. I try to please everybody. You work so hard at that...Sometimes too nice and people take advantage of me. I don't stand up for myself enough.

Another woman reported:

> What I really don't like about myself is that I have to be pushed way too far before I wake up and say 'hey, that's not okay!'. I think a big part of it was growing up lesbian. A great big part of that was growing up female. As long as I kept things private, I could preserve a sense of respect for myself.

Maddy's (1985) assertion that women must relinquish their need to nurture others and begin to nurture themselves was exemplified by two participants who felt that greater attention to meeting their own needs actually enabled them to accomplish life tasks and meet the needs of others more effectively and efficiently. One explained:

> That's one thing I don't do in my career anymore as important as it is to me. I don't sacrifice myself for my job anymore. I used to years ago. I've finally realized that if you look out for number one and she becomes your best friend, you can do things better for other people.

Although proud of her increased independence and self-confidence in midlife as compared to earlier years, one divorced woman shared a painful memory of rejection:

> I'm much more independent and more confident than I was in my 30s. Probably not as much as my 20s, though not much more, because that's never been one of my strong points. I think I'm able to handle a lot more because I'm on my own and I have to. Looking back, as far as my relationship with my husband, here are things I should have asked for and gotten. I was not very demanding and just sort of let things slide by. I would certainly not do that today. No, I don't think about it often, but I still have that stigma of someone saying "I don't love you anymore. You're no good.". That's difficult to overcome, even ten years later, knowing what I've accomplished and can do things for myself. It's still a very hard thing to accept. It's tough.

For seven women, the increased self-confidence and assertiveness they appreciated in their own development were qualities that were noticed by other people in their lives. The participants thought they had more influence over other people in midlife than ever before. They cited examples of family members, friends and associates who now sought their opinion or guidance on matters of importance. For two women, influence over others in midlife was happening for the first time in their adult lives. A 44 year old woman gave this example of greater influence over others from her relationship with her widowed mother:

> With my mother, it's significantly different. She asks me more. She really wants my opinion and thinks it has some value and occasionally asks my opinion about things about which I have no expertise! I'm basically pleased that she's treating me as a fellow adult.

Although some women reported having influence over others in earlier years, they believed this influence was greater in midlife and that people sought their counsel more often. They took pride in what they viewed as a more respected and valued status in the eyes of the significant people in their lives.

One woman, however, found such influence to be an unwelcome strain:

> I'm very uncomfortable about influencing others. It's something I have trouble with in terms of psychotherapy. Yet I know that it happens and that no matter what I do or don't do, I'm going to be influencing people. There is this horrible thing about responsibility....I don't really feel it but I've been told I influence people. I feel very, very uncomfortable.

Of the 18 participants who were employed, half stated that success in their job made a significant contribution to their self-confidence and sense of competence in midlife, as suggested by Coleman, Antonucci, Adelmann & Crohan (1983) and Baruch, Barnett and Rivers (1983). For some women, it was one of several aspects of their lives that contributed to their self-esteem:

> I love my life...but my job before everything! I work very hard and being among the best and having been recognized as Teacher of the Year four times and I have won many awards. The best one is when I go to the supermarket and the kids want to kiss and hug me and say "Hi Mrs. T.". To see that I, the grandmother, will get the children of the children I taught this year!

For others, it supported their sense of competence more than other areas of their lives:

> I'm a career person. I enjoy working full-time. I love the contact I have with the adults and kids... Parenting is a challenge...In my relationship with my husband, it's crazy! In my job I'm more self-confident, but I ought to be because I've been there forever!

> I'm competent in raising a family and in my work...The job I have I really enjoy...I've been highly recommended out there and that's good...I've maintained a home and a lot of friendships. But I don't feel like I'm overly successful in making the most of myself.

Physical Well-being

In descriptions of their midlife experience, each participant commented upon physical health and appearance and described similar physiological changes, including the anticipation or experience of menopause.

Appearance

All of the women interviewed could describe changes in their appearance that were evident to them and those around them. Greying hair and wrinkling skin were the two most common transformations mentioned by all participants. All admitted they looked older than ever before but their attitudes toward their midlife appearance varied. Contrary to Melamed's (1983) theory of "appearance anxiety" that causes "irrational fear of losing everything" (p. 70) in women, a number of midlife women accepted the changes comfortably and were content with their more mature image. One woman

confidently said:

> There are some really great looking older lesbians and I assume I'll be one of them. I mean, I look a lot older than I used to. I look at pictures and say 'oh my god, I used to look younger'. There's a way to look and a way to be. You can have grey hair. My hair will just be greyer and handsome, I think.

Another spoke of the influence of her Chinese heritage on her ability to accept the changes that occur with aging with serenity:

> It doesn't affect me. As I said, in my culture, growing older is not a big deal. We don't talk about it that much. We just face the changes as a cycle of life.

Two women were extremely bothered by midlife changes in appearance. Consistent with Melamed's (1983) theory that women are trained in the importance of a pleasing appearance from childhood, one woman admitted that good looks were of paramount importance to her in earlier years. As Melamed suggests, she viewed youth and beauty as synonymous and grieved the loss of both in midlife:

> A loss. The changes are so hard to deal with. Things that I never had to worry about - wrinkles, flab, greying hair, speckled skin. Being youthfully pretty was always important to me. And now it's so different! Changes that are losses.

A second participant didn't place a high value on appearance as a younger women, yet revealed her intense dissatisfaction with her appearance and, as a result, her diminished sense of personal worth (Melamed, 1983):

> It's never been important to me. There are times when I think I look so bad I can't go anywhere. So in that regard, yes, it is important to me to a

> certain degree. Because of my weight, it's probably more important to me now than when I was younger. When I go back to see high school friends, they are not even going to know who I am. It bothers me.

Melamed states "the eyes of others are ultimate mirrors" (1983, p. 73) and describes the "exteriorization of our identity" (p. 84) in which women's self image is affected by the response to her appearance that others show her. For some women, other people's response to their older appearance had a negative effect on their self image and troubled them far more than the changes themselves. One said:

> It's interesting. It's not looking at myself so much as the way others perceive me. Looking in the mirror doesn't bother me. Sometimes I wonder if I should do something about the grey hair. It's not a big issue. It was a real adjustment to me when I was in my late 30s. Before that I had looked very young and then I started looking my age.

One 47 year old divorced mother of two grown children spoke candidly about the external forces that motivated her to color her grey hair to gain a more youthful appearance:

> My hair is almost completely white, but, in the last year or so, I've started coloring it again because I believe men feel very threatened by a woman who has prematurely grey hair. I felt I had to do it. I feel it looks better, softer. But I don't like the idea that I had to do it.

Another woman said:

> I just don't like the way society views me. When I'm with young people I feel very young. I feel I have to watch it because I probably look like an old woman to them! My partner says all the time that I'm a character and other people say I'm a character because I do what I want and say what I want. If I were younger, they wouldn't think that...I still want to do what I want and enjoy my life. It's too bad I'm viewed as a character. All

> of a sudden you're a character now. When you were young you were the life of the party!

Two participants stated that other people's positive reactions to their midlife appearance enhanced their self image and diminished their own discomfort with their older appearance. A 50 year old woman smiled as she described her husband's response to her aging:

> The most important part is that I couldn't ask for a better husband. He thinks I'm the most beautiful girl, I'm the most wonderful wife, the most wonderful mother!...My husband says that, inside and out, I haven't changed in the years he has known me.

Health

All participants reported an awareness of personal health in midlife. While 18 women reported they received regular physical examinations from a physician, one refused to seek such medical care because of her disappointment with prior treatment by a physician. Although they believed in using doctors for health care, two divorced women and one unmarried woman did not have health insurance. Consistent with recent reports (Stein, 1994) regarding the high number of people in the United States without health insurance, these women found the cost of medical insurance so prohibitive that it prevented them from seeking regular physical examinations. One explained:

> I financially avoid it. It's expensive and it's one of the expenses I don't need. I have gone for pap smears and there was a freebie at the hospital a couple of years ago and I had a mammogram. It had been from the time Bruce was born. It had been

eight or nine years since I had my pap smear.

Although she had both a private physician and gynecologist whom she saw regularly, a community health center worker expressed her deep concern for the women who were unable to afford medical care.

> If this country does not take advantage of national health or some kind of plan. That's one of the things that's real bothersome to me, that there are a lot of women who don't have health care. And there are these young kids who are having to take jobs where they don't have health benefits. People like us who have jobs and health care may have to trade off on our private physicians for more access for more people.

For a few women, an awareness of physical health was a continuation from early adulthood. For the majority, however, it was more important in their midlife years. The increase in attention to health, which ranged from slightly more to significantly greater than earlier years, supported Katchadourian (1987) and Tough's (1982) discovery that an increased awareness of health occurred in midlife adults as a result of advice from their physicians, the passage of a birthday, or signs from their bodies.

An added motivation for increased awareness of one's own health among the participants in this study was the experience of a loved one's illness. Several women admitted they had taken their health for granted earlier in life. When five women witnessed the illness or disability of a parent, family member or friend, they became more aware of the fragile nature of their own physical health than ever before and somewhat

fearful that serious illness could happen to them. One woman, who experienced the serious illness of her father as well as that of people her age, described how such experiences have frightened her:

> My concern probably directly relates to my father's very serious illness, for a start. I'm very healthy but you can see what can happen to people. Plus I've seen some people close to my age who have had very serious illnesses at this point since I've been in my 40s. It's sort of frightening.

Twenty women rated their health at midlife from good to excellent. Two were troubled by back injuries. A serious back injury, the result of an automobile accident in which her passenger was killed, prevented one woman from working and participating in many recreational activities. At 49, she said:

> This decade has been a lot more difficult for me...I don't know if it's because of my back injury or that my body has accelerated in decay and just limits me all over the place. I used to travel to Boston three or four times a week. By my body hasn't allowed me to do that for the last 15 years and it's been very isolating.

Her comments revealed her disability's severe impact on her life in the last decade as well as on her thoughts of the future, illustrating Shanan's (1983) findings that people who once defined themselves in terms of physical abilities may find their loss in midlife a wrenching experience.

Although most women were in good health, they observed several relatively minor midlife changes in physical ability that had gradually taken place. Consistent with reports by Barrow and Smith (1983) and Katchadourian (1987), these

changes included increased fatigue, greater tendency toward weight gain, arthritis, tension related disorders and, most commonly, noticeable changes in vision and slightly decreased flexibility of movement (Diekelmann, 1977; Newman, 1982).

Four women acknowledged they were worried about their health in midlife because of smoking or excessive drinking. Two women stopped or moderated their drinking in early midlife, consistent with Katchadourian (1987) and Tough's (1982) observations that midlife adults are more likely to improve their health habits than younger adults are. Another stopped smoking eight years ago when she was 52 years old. She described difficulty in quitting the habit:

> I used to smoke, believe it or not. I stopped in '85. I went back to smoking, tried again, then in '85 I got rid of the cigarettes. After 25 years, you just can't stop. I had no patch or anything. I did it but the urge is still there. I feel much better. I used to huff and puff. I used to have nicotine fingers and now I don't.

One woman couldn't change her smoking habit despite its threat to her health. She said:

> I worry about my health and I regret smoking but I can't seem to stop. I probably haven't lead the cleanest life that I could have so, you know, that's troubling in some way. I feel that I've been very lucky health wise. That would be my number one concern.

Menopause

Menopause was a subject discussed by all participants. Half the women raised the issue without prompting while the others commented after an interview probe about the topic. Contrary to the important role in women's lives suggested by

the popularity of the topic of menopause in the media and literature, most women did not view or anticipate menopause as a disruptive event in their lives, confirming the research findings of DeLorey (1981) and Baruch, Barnett and Rivers (1983).

Of the 22 women interviewed, 5 said they had completed or were nearing completion of menopause. While two found it a manageable experience, one described it as a difficult emotional one:

> It was really weird. I'll tell you what it was. It was suddenly not knowing and understanding this body of mine that was doing strange things. It was like someone else's body. I actually expressed this to my doctor. That was an emotional experience that suddenly I was out of control.

Twelve women noticed physical changes that indicated the onset of menopause. Consistent with symptoms discussed in the literature (Doress & Siegel, 1987; Greenwood, 1989; Porcino; 1991; Reitz, 1977), they experienced missed menstrual periods, more frequent or longer periods, changes in sleep patterns, and hot flashes. Of the 12 women, 3 used hormone replacement therapy to help manage some of the physical aspects of menopause. Two were encouraged to begin such a program by their physicians. The third was influenced by a friend who shared similar symptoms that were relieved with estrogen. She explained:

> I actually decided to go on estrogen. My periods stopped and it wasn't a big deal at all. I wondered why everyone makes such a big deal about menopause. All these stories I heard. Then I dried out and I didn't want to do estrogen. I

> bought all these books on natural ways to do menopause. My friend Betsy said "I didn't want to dry out, so I just did estrogen". So I did, too.

Nine women reported their successful management of the physical changes of menopause without medication. Several reported hormone replacement therapy had been suggested, though not urged, by their physician. Along with other women, one participant stated her physician explained the benefits and the risks of hormone therapy and encouraged her to make her own decision. She said:

> My menopause came sort of suddenly. Well, not really because I had been skipping periods and then one day it just stopped. I was having these terrible hot flashes and went to the doctor. He gave me all the conventional stuff. I said I was having all these hot flashes and what could I do? He mentioned estrogen, told me the pros and cons, and I decided no, because I was generally feeling well and I didn't want to take hormones.

Five women noticed no physical symptoms to suggest the onset of menopause. Two others had undergone hysterectomies several years earlier in midlife and reported that they were symptom free.

In addition to her assertion that observation of mothers and other family members influences ideas about aging, Greenwood (1989) calls attention to the negative memories of their mother's menopausal years that many women have. This experience was validated by six participants who, prior to midlife, had observed a mother or other close family member encounter difficulty during menopause. They remembered incidents of high emotionality, depression and problems with

excessive bleeding and cramping during the process. The participants attributed both the physical and the emotional symptoms to the experience of menopause, exemplifying the inaccurate stereotypes of this process discussed by Reitz (1977), Parlee (1984), and Doress and Siegel (1987). As one of two women who had had a hysterectomy early in midlife, one participant commented:

> I bypassed all that. I'm glad I did because my mother had a terrible one and I always dreaded it. My mother used to throw plates and have wild tantrums. She knew it....I'm someone who doesn't like to give up control, so I was kind of dreading menopause, but none of that!

Despite Greenwood's assertions that these experiences influence women's anticipation of their own menopause, none of the women who had witnessed problems with menopause within their families were worried about the onset of their own menopause.

Four women who had not begun menopause said that they didn't spend a great deal of time thinking about it and didn't expect it would be a particularly difficult experience. The experience of menopause was not a troubling preoccupation for most midlife woman, as one explained:

> I just want my period to stop. People say "oh your hormones". I don't really expect to be affected. I think I expect to just ride it out, kind of like a cork in the ocean. I don't expect that anything is going to happen that I'm not going to be able to deal with.

A divorced woman's comment that she would be reluctant to reveal her experience of menopause to any male illustrates the

persistent influence of the stereotype of menopausal women as old and unattractive. She said:

> I totally and completely expect it but not to mention it to any male. He would think "Oh my God she's old."! I don't give these guys much credit, Paula. It's just this is what happens. It's the norm and you accept it.

While one participant enjoyed open conversations about menopause, three other women commented on the mystery that surrounds the topic, a theme that permeates research on the experience (Greenwood, 1989; Greer, 1991; Holt, 1982; Reitz, 1977; Sheehy, 1992). Two women said their mothers had never talked with them about menopause. As one related:

> I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it but I think about it sometimes. I figure that when I get to it I'll get to it. It's funny, people in my family don't discuss health, particularly menstrual health. My mother never mentioned it and it probably wasn't a problem. I think people in my family think that if you ignore something like that it won't be a problem!

A 60 year old woman admitted she didn't know what menopause meant. When I explained that menopause refers to the time when menstrual periods change and eventually cease, she replied:

> Oh, wow! That's going way back. I had my youngest one when I was 30 and by 35 I had nothing. It stopped. That was it. You know when you go once a year and have your check up? He'd say "How about hot flashes?". I'd say I don't know what hot flashes are! They'd say you get cranky and I didn't go through any of that. Absolutely nothing!

Consistent with current research which points to menopause as either a neutral or positive occurrence in women's lives (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Baruch, 1984; Long &

Porter, 1984; Luria & Meade, 1984; Rubin, 1979), two women said menopause would be a welcome event in their lives, particularly because they would no longer have to worry about becoming pregnant. In the words of a 53 year old:

> I keep thinking that it should be part of my life, because I'm 53 years old! From what I've read, somewhere between 45 and 55 is when it strikes. Time's running out here. I want to get it over with! I do see symptoms. I started my period today so I'm not pregnant. It bothers me that I still have to worry about that. The fact that it's coming is generally positive to me. We talk a lot at work about it...I just asked my doctor if he would do an estrogen test for me...We talked about how much they don't know.

The comments regarding menopause made by a majority of the women in this study indicate their lack of preoccupation with the experience as well as their conviction that it is or will not be a troubling event in their lives. Their remarks contradict the "the myth of myths" (Grossman & Bart, 1980) of menopause as a harrowing experience that looms an ominous occurrence in women's lives.

Sexuality

In their descriptions of midlife, the women in this study revealed the importance of sexuality in their lives. Seventeen participants rated sexual activity as both important and enjoyable in midlife, a point of view supported by contemporary research (Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983; Doress & Siegel, 1987; Greenwood, 1989).

Six divorced or unmarried women said they were not

sexually active at the time of their interview but confirmed their interest in such a relationship. They cited the lack of opportunity to meet a suitable partner as a major reason for their inactivity (Doress & Siegel, 1987; Greenwood, 1989) as well as a higher level of selectivity in choosing social companions. A 51 year old woman was of two minds in explaining this phenomenon:

> I have two opinions about it. At the universal level, middle age women are just as sexual and as interested in that kind of thing as anybody else. At the personal level, I have not been sexually active for I can't even remember when, it's been that long. The reason I haven't been sexually active has really been by default. It wasn't something I decided not to do. It just happened that I wasn't dating anybody. It happened for years.

A divorced woman commented:

> ....I believe, and this evolved recently, that you're never too old for sex. Unfortunately, you don't always get what you want....I made the conscious decision not to date until I could improve my taste in men. I feel I don't need men. I've gone years without a man.

Six married women reported that they continued to enjoy a satisfying sexual life with their husbands. Two lesbian women also enjoyed satisfying sexual relationships with their partners of many years. In commenting on her sexual appeal, one stated:

> I don't think about it at all. Lorna is pleased with me. I don't have any worries about that relationship. I don't expect that to change and the rest is in your imagination anyway! I just assume everybody's hot for me!

A 53 year old woman's remarks support Pfeiffer and Davis'

theory (1972) that sexual activity in midlife mirrors sexual practices in early adulthood:

> I still have sexual relationships and I intend to have them at 63 and 73!...I don't think I'm totally absorbed with sex like I might have been when I was younger. In my first marriage, sex was just something you did. I became more interested in sex when I was a single woman.

One midlife woman explained that her sexual activity had diminished in midlife because, despite a very loving marriage of 36 years, she and her husband no longer had sex together although they shared the same bed. On the other hand, a lesbian woman commented on an increased level of sexual activity compared to previous years even though she was not currently involved in an intimate relationship. She said:

> It's more than I can handle! The women who have been attracted to me have been dynamite sexually, much more so than women in my younger years. I think part of that is the change that's happened in the last few years in how they grew up. There seems to be an incredible difference, in my experience anyway, in women and women's expectations of sexuality, especially lesbian women. And I see that as true also with younger homosexual women. It's incredible.

Two popular stereotypes regarding sexuality in midlife and later years suggest that women are neither interested nor actively engaged in sexual activity (Doress & Siegel, 1987). The women in this study contradict both stereotypes through their descriptions of the midlife experience in which both sexual interest and sexual activity are meaningful components of their lives.

Relationships

Gilligan's (1982) research concludes that women reach midlife with a psychological history of ongoing attachment and relationship to others. In light of this theory, it is not surprising that a connection to other people was a common theme as women described their midlife experience. The relationships they mentioned most frequently were those with husbands and partners, parents, siblings, children, grandchildren and friends.

Husbands and Partners

Although their expectations of marriage and family seemed highly probable in their earlier years, in midlife most women found themselves in circumstances that were quite different. One woman who expected to be single was married with two children. Five others who expected lifelong marriages were divorced; one was widowed and five remained unwed. Two of them said:

> When I was 20, I thought I'd be married, very settled, ten children. I'd be educated, be almost finished raising children and choosing to do things on my own. I'm a Roman Catholic nun. I'm not married. I don't have any children....I guess that shifted at about age 26!

> I thought that I'd be married, have the proverbial ideal two children, working in a career....It has not turned out that way obviously. I don't know why. It wasn't for lack of trying on my part. It just didn't happen.

In her 20s, one woman envisioned her future in an enduring lesbian relationship. At midlife, she was disappointed that this expectation had not reached fruition:

> I had a long-term relationship start when I was 28 that I thought I would be in for years. What's difficult now is that I always thought I would be in a long-term relationship and none of the last four have worked out like the last one...We had made plans to be partners together.

Nine of the 22 women were married and lived with their husbands. Two were involved in longterm lesbian relationships. The Benin and Nienstedt (1985) studies found that marital satisfaction is high in midlife, a conclusion supported by a most of the women who described satisfying, supportive, mutually respectful, loving relationships with their partners and spouses. One woman, married for 25 years, said:

> He's very strong and a very nice person. I would say he's nicer than I am (laughs). He's very proud of and he loves his children. If he has a dollar, he would spend 80 cents on them and 20 cents on himself. I respect that. He encouraged me to finish school. We were both struggling when he was in graduate school and I was getting my nursing degree. He's the one who gave me all the encouragement. We share our family decisions. For his business or my career, we talk about it.

A woman who remarried many years after her divorcing her first husband compared the two marriages:

> Maybe because I'm older, I'm a much different woman than my first time. My first husband was a strong willed person who ruled the roost. He was the boss and there was no give and take situation. I was so stupid. I had no respect for myself and he didn't respect me or women in general. He treated me terribly. Because I'm more independent now, it's different. It's a much happier, fun, more equal marriage. Like night and day. I can't even remember the first marriage.

A lesbian woman described her five year relationship with her partner in the same loving way:

> I think of us as partners for life. I hope that's the way it works out. I'm very comfortable with it now. It took me a while. Now we buy things together. In the beginning that was really hard for me because I immediately thought "What if we break up?". Now we've actually made a lot of major purchases together and that feels like a partnership. I love her and I want to spend the rest of my life with her.

In contrast, two married women spoke of serious struggles in their marriages. Consistent with Vaillant (1977) and Gould's (1978) findings that marital issues may intensify in midlife, they described the ways in which they had grown emotionally apart from their husbands. One said:

> In my relationship with my husband, it's crazy. I think he's going through some stuff. He's three and a half years older than me. Less time spent together, even when the kids were small. His job is a strain with night hours. I feel it pushes us each in a different direction.

The other explained:

> Our relationship is not very good. He's miserable. I was miserable too but I couldn't stand to feel the way he does. No companionship and I can't think of the last time we communicated....He's very angry at me and blames me for a lot of things which is convenient. I've gone past all that because you can't stay in those feelings...I've learned. The hardest thing to learn is letting somebody be! You're not going to change them...Now, down the line, I want to be alone..free of the unhappy situation that I'm in.

Although she described a pleasing marriage of 36 years duration, one participant related the difficulty in her relationship with her husband as he adjusts to his retirement and restructuring of his time, a significant challenge according to Glick's research (1980). She said:

> I've been married 36 years. He drives me crazy

> (laughs). He retired two years ago. He's retired. He wants to go with you. He's 64. I'm not ready to retire. I say "Joey, you're retired and don't ask me to retire!". I'll only retire if the doctor says I have to because of ill health. But every now and then he'll say can we go here and there and I say we'll go some other time...I really didn't expect it to be as hard when he retired!

Parents and Siblings

For 17 participants, one or both parents were still living. Baruch and Barnett (1983) found midlife women have rewarding relationships with parents and Shanas (1979) characterized the parent and midlife child connection as one of concern and emotional attachment. Eleven women confirmed these findings as they reported their close, positive relationship with their parents. In midlife many women had come to terms with issues of mild or serious discord in their earlier interactions with their mothers and fathers and had moved beyond those differences to a harmonious relationship, as Helson and Moane (1987) found in their research. One said:

> My father is dead. My mother is, the thing is, we may disagree. But I have the greatest respect for her for a lot of things. But, you know, there are some things we don't agree on. My mother likes to pick on people. So I just tease her. She's more like a friend to me. She's a different kind of person and I'm very different from her.

One woman, daughter of an alcoholic father who emotionally abused her as a young girl, shared the change in her relationship with her parents:

> My mother and I took a lot of work in therapy. I've worked so hard on myself to recover my self-esteem, who I am, to work on my relationships with my

> family so that they're honest and the best they can be. With my father I'm civil and polite. It's honest. Now I know that this is who he is. I know to get out of the house when he starts drinking. I don't care about seeing him. I go to see my mother. He can't just sit and have a chat - he's so intense! He wants a fight or argument. Now I know not to play the game. When I was younger I used to get sucked in!

In contrast with findings that connections with parents are good in midlife (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Shanas, 1979), five women reported strained or troubled relationships. Two women were estranged from their parents while three others had distant or unpleasant associations with them. One lesbian woman described her estrangement from her mother who never acknowledged her sexual orientation. In midlife, this woman was reconciled to her parent's lack of acceptance:

> We haven't spoken in quite a few years....When I was 23 I thought I could get my mother used to the idea. It's not just being a lesbian. It's everything. It's like I rejected, from her point of view, everything she taught me. I guess now I'm just reconciled to the fact. Then Mother's Day comes and I get grumpy but it's not a big emotional thing anymore.

Contrary to a popular stereotype, minimal conflict with mothers was found in midlife women (Shanas, 1979), but it was a problem for several participants, one of whom described her nearly lifelong poor relationship to her mother in this manner:

> We don't have a close relationship. She's not my friend. I never confided in her, ever. I've often thought about my relationship with my mother. She makes me so mad sometimes I want to strangle her.

The same woman went on to describe a new midlife role of

caregiver for her mother, a role shared or anticipated by three other women:

> I'm one of four children, but I'm the only one around so I'm her mother now! She doesn't live with me but it's this close (gestures). I hate it. I hate being her mother! About four years ago my brothers and sisters moved away. The big change now is that I have to deal with her now more than I ever did before. When my father was alive and my sister and brothers were around, I didn't have to have contact with her for two or three weeks at a time! Now I have to see her at least once a week, call her to see if she's okay. It's a drag and selfish on my part. One of the reasons it bothers me is that I have no experience being a caregiver because I was never a mother. All of a sudden, I'm a mother with no experience and I don't know how to handle it!

Adult development research is only beginning to focus on this shift in role for a growing number of adult children, particularly women, who assume the responsibility for the care of aging parents. Studies have found the midlife woman becomes "sandwiched" between her own needs and those of the aging parent (Berkun, 1983; Bumagin & Hirn, 1982; Roberts & Newton, 1987). Finding this role reversal very difficult, one single and one married woman, who had never raised children, were surprised to become caregivers for their aging mothers. The single woman said:

> I never thought I'd end up being caretaker for my mother as I am. Three years since the stroke, and before that she had been living with me and her health was declining. There really was a relationship that had switched and I was becoming the mother. Maybe if I had gone through it with children on my own, it would be easier...

A lesbian woman described her anxiety about the anticipated need for care for her longterm partner's mother.

The need is complicated by the fact that their lesbian relationship is not fully disclosed to their families. She said:

> Her mother is going blind and her father has a heart condition and diabetes. He's not going to last very long. That's going to be really hard. I wonder what's going to happen when he dies. I'm guessing that he'll die first. What's going to happen to the mother? She's not going to live with me and I've been very up front about it. I mean, we're not even out to her!

Three participants had parents who were both deceased. Five women had fathers who were deceased but mothers still living. Involved with the difficult task of recovery from the death of a loved one (Kastenbaum & Costa, 1977), four women described the emotional trauma they felt at the death of their parent and the painful void it left in their lives, a common midlife experience reported by Vaillant (1977) and Gould (1978). One sadly described her father's long illness and death:

> My father had a really close relationship with all three of us. He was the nurturing parent. Watching him die was very painful, as my mother put it, cell by cell. It was four years. It was extremely, extremely painful...I did have a traumatic time around my father's illness and death.

For midlife women, the quality of their relationships with siblings closely paralleled that with parents. Of the 20 participants with brothers and sisters in their families, 16 enjoyed warm and mutually supportive relationships with them. While most had enjoyed good sibling relationships for their entire adult life, two women had reconciled earlier

difficulties and "hard feelings" with their brothers or sisters in midlife. One woman commented on her midlife change of heart toward her sister and other family members:

> This is another good thing about being older. It isn't pretend. I didn't realize it, but when I was younger I was pretending a lot to be happy, like at parties. Now it's more honest. It's like that's my sister and she can be a real pain in the ass. But there are other things about her and, yeah, I like her. I admire her. It feels more honest. I'm not being Pollyanna-ish. Underneath that statement is a lot of pain and hard work with therapy....When you're older, you're more able to see things clearly. Family members stop being a certain role and start being human beings.

Children and Grandchildren

Ten participants had children, with ages ranging from 4 to 33. In their studies of sons and daughters as young adults, Green and Boxer (1986) found that parenthood in midlife is often a source of pride, a conclusion validated by eight midlife women who reported good relationships with their offspring. They enjoyed being in their children's company and felt there was good communication between them. On the other hand, two women found raising their young children an overwhelming challenge. As one mother admitted:

> Parenting is a challenge and I go way up and down with that one. Sometimes I feel like I'm doing a good job and sometimes I feel like I'd better quit and I don't want to be a mother anymore.

Consistent with Montmeyer's (1983) conviction that most adolescents have conflicts with their parents at times, five women who enjoyed good relationships with their offspring reported past problems such as drug and alcohol abuse,

rebelliousness, and truancy and lack of effort at school when their children were adolescents. One divorced woman recalled problems with her teenage son and her pride in seeing him as a college graduate and first year law student:

> He had started to drink and screw around. It seemed like every time he drank he got in trouble. When a kid turns off from school and you know he's capable, you don't know that he'll turn back again. ...A lot of time I could logic things out with him. But it lasted pretty much all of high school. I have a good feeling now that it's over. And I would be the first to give him credit for doing a lot of it on his own.

Research indicates that, because of "their position in the generational hierarchy" (Berger, 1988, p. 506), midlife parents feel obligated to help both the younger and older generation. A rapidly increasing number of adult children who are unemployed or not yet earning enough to live on their own are now living with their parents (Glick and Lin, 1986). In addition, young divorced adults often return to their parental home with children of their own (Maddy, 1985) to find the emotional and practical support that they could not find elsewhere (Berger, 1989).

Two study women reported their adult children were living with them. One talked about her son, in his 30s, who had never left home. Another spoke of her daughter, in her 20s, who left her husband and returned to her parents' home with her infant daughter more than a year ago. The experiences of these two women contradict the popular stereotype of midlife as a time when women mourn "the empty nest" as their children

leave home, supposedly for the rest of their parents' lives.

The two women whose adult children lived with them were surprised when these adult children didn't leave home or returned home after living independently. One said:

> I thought I would retire, travel and whatever kids I had would be grown up and out! But they're not! I have one at home.

Of the two women who expected their offspring would live independently as adults, one found it hard to have her daughter and young granddaughter living in her home and to adjust to the demands for childcare placed upon her. According to Stueve and O'Donnell's (1984) findings, a rapidly increasing number of midlife grandmothers are called upon for daily care of grandchildren who may or may not reside with them.

Two midlife women still grieved the accidental deaths of one of their children many years ago, consistent with findings by Lehman (1987) that many parents never fully recover from the death of a child. One woman, whose son died in a motor vehicle accident, shared her feelings:

> You always feel that they would bury you, that you wouldn't bury them. It's 14 years for me...You know you're going to lose your parents. So you accept that. But here's a kid. He's healthy. Nothing's wrong. And the next thing you get a call and he's gone. It's hard.

Four women made special comments that their highest priority and greatest joy in life was to be with their children, share in their activities, and see them grow and live a full and happy life. They also spoke of the importance

of having other interests and priorities as their children got older. As one divorced woman said:

> I have a true delight in my children. I know I keep coming back to them, but they're a big part of my life. We have a good relationship, difficult at times with the 14 -year-old coming into his own. Over the last few years, my life has revolved around them. I see that that has to change. I need to go out and find something else. Otherwise, it's going to be a lonely existence as Kelly goes to college.

Three participants had grandchildren. All three enjoyed their new status as "the new American grandparent", a term used by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) who attribute grandparents' pleasure to the enjoyment of children's companionship without the worries they had with their own children. One woman, who became a grandmother through her second marriage to a man with a married son, commented on the joy of her role:

> This is the closest I'll be to being a grandmother. I think it's great to have these little squirty kids call me Grandma Julie. The little girl drew pictures that I have on my refrigerator that say "Grandma Julie, I love you!". My heart just swells. I've never had that in my life. So having a stepson who provided me with these stepgrandchildren is like - he's in my will!

Friendships

As Block and Greenburg's (1980) studies of women and friendship revealed, the friendship experience is a recurring and significant theme in the lifelong process of human development, particularly in the lives of women. In support of those findings, 18 participants placed a high value on friendships, particularly those with other women. Many women

said that friends became more important with each passing year.

> I can't imagine being where I am now without friends. It's always been true. When you're young they're more superficial because it's more social. I think when I hit my 30s friends really took on substance and I could really be a support for both men and women. Most of my friends have been women but there are men in my life who are friends and there for me while I'm there for them. I can't imaging a life without friends.

Two women celebrated their increased capacity for friendship as midlife women. One asserted:

> Friendships are important. I'm a much different type of friend because of my capacity to give. I'm a different type of friend, a different type of partner, a different type of mother.

The other added:

> I've always had friends that I can just talk to about anything. I feel like I value it more because I try not to abuse it as much. I thought I was too one-sided as a young adult and now I try to listen more. Close friends? Maybe I have four.

In describing the various roles friends play in their lives, participants identified important qualities in friendship that were identical to those found by Weiss and Lowenthal (1975): similarity, defined as shared interests, reciprocity, defined as mutual participation in the friendship, and compatibility, defined as enjoyment of interactions with one another.

Three women saw their friends as valuable sounding boards who provided support during times of important decision making. A few praised the personal support that friends provided them, particularly during difficult personal and

family times. They valued the listening ear or sympathetic heart or helping hands that friends offered in these instances. They said:

> They helped us out when we were in trouble and we were able to pay them back.
>
> Helping me when I've had issues with my son Sam in particular and people have understood and said this is what helped me when I went through it.

Several women cited the importance of friends for sharing common interests, listening to each other's ideas and enjoying one another's company. They said:

> I have three very close friends back on the island and five close friends where I work. Of those five, three of them are just part of my own life, in everything I do. I met them through academics. Those three have been friends for 23 years and the ones in Puerto Rico for my life. They are also linked to education. They are all like me.
>
> I have a whole set of friends who go out to lunch every month. Close friends who listen to each other and help each other and enjoy each other. I always have had good friends.

For some women who still treasured close relationships to childhood companions, friends were an important link to the past. A 51 year old commented on the subject:

> I very much maintain contact and friendship with my childhood friends. Don't put as much work into it as I could. You know, pick up the phone and we talk and that's very important to me. They very much define my beginning years and my retirement. A number of them have passed away over the years and a couple of them we lost to AIDS and that's been kind of sad. That's important to me. Friendships have always been big with me.

A few participants marvelled that they were able to resume the intimacy of close friendship whenever they were

together with old friends despite infrequent contact or geographic distance between them. One woman shared:

> When I was in high school, I had a lot of friends. We got married and hung around together. When I was divorced, none of them was ever divorced, and I was the single person and excluded from the group. I lost all of those friends except for one. We've been best friends since seventh grade and I see her every year or two, but we pick up where we left off. It's that type of relationship.

Her experience of exclusion from old friends after her divorce highlights Rubin's (1985) findings that a divorced woman is likely to be excluded from the social life of married friends. Rubin also found that, between single women and married couples, the needs of the married couple are almost always given first consideration, a fact that single women often lament. A lesbian woman's story illustrates this point:

> When I was younger, I felt I had a great capacity for making friends, but I seem to have lost that and I don't know if it's just intolerance....But you don't have things in common when somebody has a husband or boyfriend. That's always going to be first and rightly so. I mean I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with that, but it's different. Women's energy's different. So I really don't spend any time at all with straight women or men or gay men or straight men. That kind of cuts down on the possibilities. I don't have anything to talk about with them.

Just as Rubin alludes to heterosexual women's complaints of difficulty in maintaining friendships with women who became lesbians, a midlife lesbian commented on having little in common with heterosexual women. In addition, she mentioned a similar difficulty in establishing friendships with other lesbians who are in a couple relationship:

> I feel a lot of heterosexual women in my church think highly of me and would like to be a friend but, like, how do we do that? I've been to a couple of parties and they've got their husband and their wife. Even lesbian cultures are into the twosome kind of thing...What sticks in my mind about women's groups is you're talking about kids and school and diapers and this and that, and I realize it's your time to get together and do that but it has nothing to do with my life. I can't add to it.

Reflecting on the importance of friendships, one participant lamented that it was difficult to develop them as a midlife woman because of the hurried pace of people's lives:

> I have close friends from every place we've lived. I think it's more difficult when you get older to develop those kinds of relationships over the years. Everyone gets busier and busier. My sister moved to Washington a few years ago and we were talking about how you don't have the same kind of drop-in friends anymore, people just hanging out together.

Antonucci's (1985) research on social support revealed that as adults grow older they are less likely than younger people to want more friends. Her conclusion was strengthened by one woman's comment that she was satisfied to have five true friends in her life and was not anxious to make more friends:

> Friends, to me, are people who stay over the long ride. I'm not so eager to make friends anymore. There's only room for so many people in my life. I don't really need a lot of people. Like when you're younger and everywhere you went, you'd try to see who was the social group and you'd try to be a part of it...I would say there are five true friends in my life.

Four other women were also satisfied with a very small number of close friends. One explained:

> I have a very small amount of close friends. I learned that from my Dad. My Dad said "You pick your friends with the fingers of your hand. That's all you can swallow. That's all you can take".

Spirituality and Community

A relationship to God or some other higher power was important in the lives of many midlife women. Sixteen participants mentioned the importance of their connection to a higher spiritual force and their need for a supportive personal community in midlife.

Of those who described spirituality in their lives, some found the practice of an organized religion the best means of expression. They described a belief in God and their active participation in an organized religion that gave structure to their spirituality and focus to their lives. Their descriptions corroborated findings by England and Finch (1991) that affiliation and religion were recurring themes in the lives of the women they interviewed. One woman described the role of her Church in this way:

> I think it gives me kind of a focus for some of the ideals that I had as a younger person. It's a place where I can really act on those ideals.

Another woman commented:

> It's different with maturity. You know how, when you're a kid, you don't really understand the scriptures or hymns? Now I understand. It was an integral part of our lives as Baptists. I certainly try to live a good life. I'm conscious of it and I work at it. I have a fundamentalist sense of right and wrong.

Another participant who was a witch in the WICCA religion

described its role in her life:

> It's like a consciousness raising. We sit and cast a circle for protection and within that there's honesty and safety. That's what I see as my religion...power with others rather than power over them.

While some women preferred practice of an organized religion, others professed a strong relationship to God but were more interested in the substance of the religion rather than adherence to particular rituals or rules, as Achenbaum's (1985) study of religion in the lives of the elderly concluded. Two women explained:

> I don't go to church or temple. But I believe that somewhere out there there's a God. When I was young I went to Buddhist temple with my mother. When I went to college I started the Bible. I always believed that if I behaved myself and was a good person, that was the most important thing. No matter what kind of religion I believed in, I figure I'll always go to heaven!

> I do not believe in organized religion...I don't call myself a Christian and I don't call myself Jewish but I just know that I believe in Him and in my heart I am a Christian. I do pray quite often and I live a very peaceful life.

Several participants professed their practice of a simple moral code that was not necessarily inspired by any external force or religion:

> I'm not a church person at all...I just try to live my life not hurting anybody and doing the best I can. I don't know if I believe in God or the hereafter. I think it's a nice edge to keep there, but I have no idea what we're here for. Like I say, I try not to hurt anybody and leave the planet a little better than I found it in ways that I can.

Four participants consciously rejected the idea of God, religion or connection to a higher power. One disenfranchised

Catholic presented this point of view:

> I have no religion whatsoever. I guess I'm an atheist. I don't think about it at all. In many ways I guess I consider people who are religious my enemies. People who really buy a fundamentalist religion are never going to have any room in their world for me. They've caused me a lot of personal pain. The Pope is not a great friend of mine. If he said to all these Catholics "Oh, you know, being gay is not so bad" my life would be a lot different because they would hear it from him and treat me a lot differently.

Of those who felt connected to a spiritual force or God, five women said it was stronger than ever before in midlife. One participant, a Roman Catholic nun, explained:

> Part of what led me was this intimate relationship I was having with God and I still have that more than ever. I think what happened ultimately for me - entering the convent was not so much the choice for me. The choice was to clearly be faithful to this inner calling whatever that was. It wasn't about the convent, it was about the relationship with God. It's something I call the fullness of life. At midlife, it's fuller than ever!

Three women who had not been actively involved in attending church or practicing a religion hoped that the connection would grow stronger in the future:

> I was born and brought up a Protestant, sort of a fundamental, strict church that didn't believe in dancing, smoking, going to the movies or any of that stuff. As soon as I grew up, I broke away from it, but I would love to belong to a church again. I do miss that. My husband was brought up a Catholic, but because he's divorced, he's excommunicated. I know he misses a sort of a connection, too. But I talk to God everyday.

A supportive and nurturing community in which to live was and important aspect of midlife for one lesbian woman. The lack of connection to such a community in her midlife years

very troubling to her. Consistent with Hoff's (1989) recognition of community affiliation as a vital human need, this participant expressed the hope of finding such a personal community as she considered her future:

> One thing that I hope is that I'll have found a community because it's too fragmented out here and I fear that I'll have to move. I've spent the last 10 years investigating coming out of the lesbian separatism into the Unitarian Church...Even though I can have all kinds of friends and heterosexual friends out here, I am the only lesbian in town that's out!

Satisfaction with Life Choices

At the close of each interview I asked each participant whether she was satisfied with the choices she had made in life. Two women responded in the negative, 16 in the affirmative, and 4 had mixed responses.

Two women who told of their dissatisfaction with life choices identified two circumstances that shaped their response. The first was unemployment and financial insecurity at the time of the interview. The second was the recent end of an intimate personal relationship in their lives. Their comments support researchers who identify sufficient finances (Berger, 1984) and intimate connections to others (Berger, 1984; Hoff, 1989) as critical to a satisfying life and optimal adaptation to aging. Each woman had been underemployed or unemployed for several years. Each was also grieving the end of a longterm intimate relationship, one with a man and one with a woman. As one of them said:

> It's really tough when your pockets are empty and your bed is, too. It's not that money or sex are all that important. It's the security thing. Not having financial security is bad enough because you question everything you've ever done and how it wasn't the right choice because here I am in my 50s with hardly two nickels to rub together. But being alone is even worse! Nobody to be with at this point in my life. After all this time, what do I have to show for my life? I know I'm better in a lot of ways than I ever was before, but then again, what do I have to show to prove it?

Financial insecurity was a troubling consideration in the assessments of life satisfaction made by four other women. Their plight illustrates numerous reports (Older Women's League, 1986; Sidel, 1986; Waring, 1988) that the median total income of women trails that of men at all ages, which makes them vulnerable to financial difficulties and twice as likely as men to be poor.

While they were comfortable with most of the choices they had made in their lives, four women described current financial difficulties that diminished their sense of satisfaction at midlife. They questioned whether or not they might have made better decisions about job training, education, employment choices, investments, spending, saving, and the geographic location in which they had chosen to live. They shared their financial plight and disappointments candidly:

> It was the jobs. I never made the right choices, I guess. Never finished school. Never tried to, even later on. Dead end jobs. No training required they always said! Easy to get whenever I wanted one, but now I have to worry about security. I should have thought of it sooner, but you just don't always see the big picture day to day.

> I try to feel that I've done a lot and to give myself credit. Because that's a big family pattern - to be critical and to disparage...If I had been able to find a job in San Francisco, things might have been different. The gay community there. And my religion. The community is much more and I would have grown up in it and been part of it rather than toughing it out here in middle nowhere Massachusetts!

Consistent with Quam and Whitford's (1992) study of lesbian women and gay men, two of three lesbian women reported life satisfaction despite problems associated with their sexual orientation in society. Of the two women who felt contentment and fulfillment in their lives, one expressed the "nagging" discouragement she felt as a midlife woman whose youthful expectation of a positive change in attitude toward lesbians had not come about.

> When I was younger, when I first came out, there was no support whatsoever. In the mid '70s, the women's movement, as confused as it was about lesbianism, there was a sense that things were going to change and things did change in many ways. And for lesbians it changed a lot, too. But the changes I was hoping for haven't come about. I've given up hope in some ways. People's attitudes... things haven't gotten better...the level of acceptance.

The majority of participants expressed a great deal of satisfaction with the choices they had made in life. Some tempered their expression of fulfillment with an awareness of imperfect circumstances in their lives and compassion for their own human qualities.

> I am <u>very</u> proud of myself. However, I also make mistakes and I have to be forgiven. I have to admit my mistakes, come to terms with my mistakes, and move on! It's being able to hold the bowl.

> I've had a good life but there are times when it does suck. I couldn't have asked for a better husband. Anything I want, I can have. I enjoy working. I'm very close to my friends.
>
> I would say that when I look at my kids, I think I accomplished a lot. When I think that I was barefoot in that village, I could never have thought that one day I would be living here...I'm a good wife and a very good nurse. I've been a good daughter. I came here and had my nursing degree in Taiwan but no degree here. I decided to go to college and I was a good student on the Dean's List. Everything I wanted to do, I did... Still, I would like to speak better English. As a person, I need to give more time for friends and service to community.

Many women used "proud" to describe their satisfaction with their life accomplishments and decision-making. Because they had survived severe personal and family difficulties in earlier years, at midlife many participants were visibly pleased as they shared their personal achievements and triumphs:

> Nothing was handed to me. I have some regrets, but I think I did very well. Who could imagine that I'd work in a town like this with trees all around, safe? I mean a lot of people I grew up with in the city were in jail. My brothers were in all kinds of trouble. It would have been easy to go in a certain direction. I'm very pleased!
>
> I'm very proud of the fact that I had the good sense and the courage to get up and leave Washington D.C. at the time I did. As needy and as desperate as I was at that point in my life, I'm very proud that I was able to say thanks but no thanks. I'd rather be single, by myself, and have some semblance of my integrity, my values. It was hard!

In his study of mental health in middle adulthood, David Chiriboga (1989) reports that a heightened awareness of personal assets and liabilities and a solid grounding of self

combine to make the midlife years a time when adults can deal with the world more effectively than ever before. Consistent with this premise, the descriptions provided by the participants in this study confirm the personal satisfaction, competence, and resilience that characterize the midlife experience of contemporary women.

To summarize, from their individual points along the midway between ages 40 and 60, the women in this study described their personal experiences of midlife. Their reports as they travel along the midway path portray this segment of the lifespan as one full of the "sights and sounds" of varied challenges and satisfactions in their lives including personal growth, physical changes, relationships to others, and appraisals of their satisfaction with the choices they've made in life to this point. The study participants described midlife as a vital and dynamic time unlike any other in their lives. One woman's depiction of her midlife experience provides an inclusive characterization with which to end this chapter:

> I've come a long way to this midpoint. I've had losses and gains in my own growth and in my life. The woman I was at 20 and 30 doesn't compare in the least with the person I am now. I've learned what's <u>really</u> important and what to let go because it doesn't matter in the long run of life. The hardest thing to deal with is that I can't control the loss of friends and family members. Their deaths, sudden or not, timely or not, have altered my life in ways that make me so sad at times because I miss all those wonderful people. But they inspire me, remind me to enjoy every moment, every loved one, every experience of life while I have it!...There's no other age like it! And

that's the joy of being a midlife woman! I know all that and, at 44, I have that wonderful awareness to carry with me for the next I-don't-know-how-many years of my life. Awareness. Personal strength. Resilience to calamity! Appreciation. Midlife? I wouldn't trade this point in my life for anything!

Chapter 6: Summary and Discussion

This study was inspired by a contradiction between one woman's observations and internal convictions and a panoply of external messages about the experience of life after age 40. It began with a host of questions about midlife and aging and expanded in its intensity upon the discovery of inadequate research on midlife women from which to seek answers to the queries.

The research was a qualitative study designed to explore the experience of women at various points in the lifespan's chronological midway, operationally defined as ages 40 to 60 in this research. Twenty-two women, who differed in age, race, sexual orientation, income level, employment, and marital and parenting status, participated in the research. Despite the various personal circumstances of these creative women, their individual portraits formed a complex composite of images with recurring themes in their lives.

Situated at various points along the chronological midway of life between ages 40 and 60, each woman answered the central research question, "What <u>is</u> the midlife experience?", from her point of view in a personal interview. Each woman painted a picture of her midlife, using the tints and shades of her own experience. From the varied and colorful images narrated by midlife women emerged a second meaning of midway, delineated in Webster's Dictionary as "an avenue at a fair,

carnival or amusement park for concessions and amusements". The metaphor was a striking one that fit not only the idea of midlife as a journey along a path but also the variety, complexity, and occasional dissonance of the sights and opportunities viewed along the way. The subtitle for this research, Views Along the Midway, was designed to emphasize both the arithmetical meaning of midway as well as its denotation as a passageway in the lifespan.

The results of this research met my purpose of exploring women's development in midlife from the perspective of women themselves. The diversity of the sample reflected the larger population of midlife women, but did not include representation of special populations such as homeless or institutionalized women or other distinct or disenfranchised groups. The results cannot and were not intended to be generalized to all women but have met my primary objective of providing meaningful insight into the lives of women in the decades between 40 and 60.

Summary of Findings

In their individual, open-ended portrayals of midlife, the women in this study described their life experience at their specific point along the midway. In addition, they described their expectations of midlife as a younger woman and their thoughts and feelings about their own aging.

Expectations of Midlife

Midlife was of little interest or focus for a number of the participants as adolescents and young adults. Busy with the activities of school, work, family, and friends, they never contemplated what life would be like in their 40s and 50s. But a majority of women had very definite "midlife dreams". When asked to describe their expectations as a younger person of what life would be like in future decades, most of these women responded in much the same way by describing their visions of husband, home and children. These expectations were influenced by their family experiences as well as the perceptions of social acceptability that were prevalent in the social setting in which they grew up in the 1950s,'60s and early '70s.

Descriptions of Midlife

As the participants described their midlife experience, it was evident that their youthful expectations proved to be inaccurate for many of the women. Yet, despite the often significant differences between their expectations and the reality of their lives along the midway, most expressed satisfaction with "the way it turned out".

The women in the study viewed midlife as a positive and fulfilling time of life despite past or present stressful circumstances in their lives. Contrary to the popular stereotype of midlife crisis as a time of overwhelming turbulence, most women disclaimed its relevance to their

lives. Those who reported that crisis occurred earlier in their adulthood were notably proud of their resilience and personal growth in midlife as result of the earlier struggle.

Sense of self. Midlife women in this study described a higher level of self-confidence, self-assurance, and self-understanding than ever before in their lives. They reported an increased sense of competence in midlife and relied upon their own internally generated standards in decision-making as opposed to external influences and expectations. While some struggled with balancing their own needs with those of others, most of the women were more in touch with their feelings and more willing to make their needs a priority in their associations with family, friends and associates. Success in work and/or family environments contributed to self-esteem for most of the women.

Physical well-being. Contrary to media images of their preoccupation with youthful appearance and cosmetic approaches to hiding signs of aging, most of the women accepted these changes comfortably although they were frequently troubled by other people's negative responses to their aging image. A few women were noticeably bothered by physical changes such as wrinkling skin, graying hair and the like, and regretted the loss of a more youthful look.

A majority of the women enjoyed good health and reported increased attention to their physical well-being and lifestyle. Heightened awareness of health in midlife was

frequently motivated by perceived physical changes, advice from a physician, or the experience of disability or illness among family members, friends and associates.

Although menopause was mentioned within the context of physical changes by all of the women, it was neither a preoccupation nor source of anxiety for most. They did not view or anticipate menopause as a disruptive event in their lives. A few saw the experience as a welcome occurrence after which they would no longer have to worry about becoming pregnant. Many women described memories of their mother's menopausal years. For some, these observations were positive ones and, for others, they were not, particularly because of the secrecy that surrounded the experience. Regardless of their observations of their mother's passage through menopause, a majority of the women were not troubled by the "the change" in their lives.

Both lesbian and heterosexual participants agreed that sexual activity was both important and enjoyable in midlife. Women who were not currently sexually active professed sincere interest in such involvement. They cited lack of opportunity to meet a suitable partner and a higher level of selectivity in choosing sexual companions as the primary reasons for their inactivity. A few women cited a decrease in sexual activity while a few others reported an increase. For most of the women, their level of sexual interest and activity in midlife mirrored those practiced in their early adulthood.

Relationships. Connection to others was an important priority in the lives of the midlife women who were interviewed. Most spoke of satisfying relationships with their lesbian or heterosexual partners and spouses. Others described serious struggles in their marriages as they had grown apart emotionally from their husbands.

Most women had rewarding relationships with their parents and siblings. Many had resolved or come to terms with earlier discord in these family associations and were grateful for more harmonious interactions in midlife. Several midlife women reported estrangement or ongoing difficulties in their relationships with parents and siblings. Lesbian women expressed disappointment in the lack of progress and continuing difficulties with family and societal acceptance of their sexual orientation.

The illness or death of a parent was a difficult emotional experience for many midlife women. The responsibility as caregiver for an elderly parent was reported by several women who described the inherent difficulties and adjustments demanded by this new role. A number of women described a difficult adjustment to the painful void created by the death of a parent.

Both parenting and grandparenting were satisfying roles for the women in this study. For many, earlier difficulties with children had improved significantly while, for others, difficulties continued and parenting seemed an overwhelming

challenge. While most expected their offspring would live independently as adults, a few women found that their adult children did not leave home or returned home after living independently.

All these midlife women placed a high value on friendships, particularly those with other women. Many reported that friends become increasingly important with each passing year. Although they valued their increased capacity for mutuality in friendships, several women acknowledged they were satisfied with a small number of good friends and were not anxious to expand that intimate circle.

Spirituality and community. A majority of the midlife women described the importance of a relationship to God or some other higher power and an affiliation with a spiritual community. A few, however, consciously rejected the idea. Among those who valued this spiritual connection, some found the practice of an organized religion the best means of expression, while others were less interested in adherence to particular rituals or religious rules and preferred a more unstructured spiritual practice.

Satisfaction with life choices. The majority of midlife women in this study communicated a great deal of satisfaction with the choices they had made in life. Tempered by their awareness of imperfect circumstances in their lives and compassion for their own human qualities, many of the women expressed pride in their accomplishments and triumphs over

adversity or personal difficulties in earlier years. Apprehensions about employment, financial difficulties, health, and the absence of a strong, intimate relationship with another person caused significant but not complete disappointment with midlife for several women.

Expectations of aging

Satisfaction and awareness of their personal strengths encouraged the women in this study to view the prospect of aging in an optimistic manner. Interactions with older adults and observations of the positive aging experience of friends and family members reinforced this positive view of their own aging. Their anticipation of the future included the hope for good health and continued connection to other people in their lives. For women who were dissatisfied with their circumstances in midlife, loneliness and anxieties about employment and personal income combined to produce a troubled anticipation of aging.

Discussion

As the Summary of Findings illustrates, this research presents a complex picture of the midlife experience based on the participants' descriptions of their lives along the midway of ages 40 to 60 years. This study of women in midlife has implications for methodology, developmental theory and professional practice.

The Midlife Experience

Despite the varying roles and diversity of life patterns and circumstances among the women in the sample, their descriptions portray midlife as a generally positive experience. Growth in self-esteem, self-awareness and self-confidence are important measures of satisfaction with life among midlife women. Although the women in the study cited a number of manageable but stressful challenges and circumstances in midlife, they dispute the popular image of midlife crisis or depression in favor of a more affirmative characterization of this period of the lifespan. The cultural stereotypes that highlight the cessation of menstruation, physical decline, and the empty nest as critical events in the middle years are inaccurate and irrelevant to the lives of the women in this study.

Although this sample of women viewed midlife with satisfaction, their experiences reveal serious challenges in these years. One participant's comment, "It's really tough when your pockets are empty and your bed is too!" highlights the two most serious problems in the experience of midlife women: financial difficulties and concerns about important personal relationships.

The economics of aging for midlife and aging women and the accompanying risk or fear of poverty are not, unfortunately, new societal problems. But statistical data about poverty are more meaningful when illustrated by the

testimony of midlife women "with hardly two nickels to rub together". Financial insecurity is a familiar problem for several participants for whom current or anticipated financial hardship is a disheartening aspect of midlife and a serious concern as they look to the future.

In addition to their concerns about financial support, many women find midlife to be a difficult time due to lack of personal support. The death of family members, the need for a significant intimate relationship, or the anticipated loss of a supportive emotional network cause some women to view midlife with concern or malaise.

While specific events and details differed in the midlife women's personal accounts of the passage along the midway, two persistent and interrelated themes permeate their individual and collective descriptions of development in midlife. The complementary themes of <u>resilience</u> and <u>personal strength</u> combine to define midlife as a unique and favorable period of the lifespan for women.

The capacity for resilience, defined by participants as the ability "to go along, make adjustments and do what needs to be done" or "to get on with it", is a dominant theme in the lives of women moving along the midway. As a result of surviving a number of challenging circumstances and adversities earlier in their lives, midlife women exhibit a significant capacity for adaptability that does not imply a sacrifice of personal fulfillment or personal goals. On the

contrary, they not only demonstrate the ability to adjust to calamity or change but also the proclivity to emerge from these circumstances as a stronger, more self-sufficient individual.

In addition to the capacity for resilience cultivated by a variety of challenges and experiences in the years preceding midlife, the sample midlife women have acquired a sense of personal competence and strength. Their heightened levels of self-confidence and self-awareness define a developmental point at which, as one participant explained, "you feel you know better". In a symbiotic manner, resilience and personal competence and strength affect and reinforce one another throughout midlife in a manner that enables these midlife women to deal with their world in a more effective and fulfilling manner than ever before.

Methodological Issues

The methodological ramifications of this study pertain to the involvement of the researcher as a participant and the involvement of the people being studied. The inspiration for this study of the midlife experience began with my connection to the topic as a midlife woman and grew to an intellectual exploration of the developmental discipline. As the researcher, my age status as a midlife woman was frequently instrumental in securing participants for the study and in earning their trust as well. The women who were interviewed, referred to as "participants" throughout this document, were

actively engaged as collaborators in the study. Several participants assisted in the pilot testing and final revisions of the interview instrument. Others assisted the researcher in gaining access to a diverse sample of women for the study. All participants enthusiastically recounted their midlife stories with expressed appreciation for the research interest in their experiences along the midway.

This study's methodological approach, in which a researcher is engaged in explicit study of a phenomenon that concerns her life and in which the participants are collaborators in the research, challenges longstanding conventional practices. Such conventional methodology defines the researcher's role as detached, objective and value neutral toward the topic as well as the participants in the study. In this study, the "insider's" perspective of the researcher and the collaborative relationship with the participants proved to be valuable assets to the research which resulted in rich experiential data from which to draw insights regarding the midlife experience of women.

Theoretical Significance

The theoretical framework for this research, as described in Chapter 1, includes four major themes: growth and change as a lifelong process, the holistic nature of development, gender differences in development, and the importance of sociocultural context in exploring the experiences of women. The results of the study contribute to each of these important

themes.

The characterizations of the years between the ages of 40 and 60 provided by the women in the study emphasize the process of growth and change that occurs both in midlife and in the early adulthood period that precedes it. Despite developmental challenges and difficulties related to the midlife period, its negative image as a life segment that is fraught with decline and personal crisis is irrelevant to the lives of midlife women for whom the benefits or positive changes are the more notable aspects of these years.

The participants' emphasis on growth in midlife support the theory of lifespan development and lifelong change in human development. Their descriptions of the subtle and significant changes in the various aspects of their personality emphasize that personality is permeable to change in midlife and not fixed in childhood and adolescence.

The holistic nature of development is underscored in the characterizations of midlife provided by this diverse sample of women. These characterizations include common physical, psychosocial and cognitive themes such as fulfillment, sense of self, physical well-being, relationships, spirituality and community, and satisfaction with life choices. Numerous research studies and popular literature have overemphasized the importance of physical changes and their accompanying distress in the lives of midlife women. Such emphasis is not only misleading, but it is also an inaccurate developmental

portrayal of the midlife period. According to the sample of women in this study, the physical aspects of the midlife period are far less significant than the psychosocial ones that center on their sense of self and relationship to others.

This research provides a theoretical picture of midlife that has relevance to women's lives because it is constructed from portrayals of this period by female participants. Whereas earlier developmental theories failed to take into account the experience of women, or they generalized male experiences into the lives of women, this study provides an authentic view of women's development in this phase of the lifespan as gleaned from the testimony of women themselves. It reveals a number of important themes in women's lives between ages 40 and 60 including the emergence of a stronger sense of self, the importance of relationships, and the satisfaction with life choices that are part of the midlife years.

The perceptions of the midlife experience by the population in general are influenced by sociocultural attitudes that devalue aging and devalue aging women. In particular, the sense of loss resulting from changes in youthful appearance, the end of childbearing capacity with menopause, and the "empty nest" that results from the departure of children from the home continue to characterize midlife in United States society. Although the results of this study have strongly indicate that these characterizations

are archaic and irrelevant to most contemporary midlife women, these perceptions continue to carry enormous social and cultural importance.

Considerations for Professional Practice

Obsolete negative images of the preoccupations and boundaries of the midlife experience for women distort the general population's image of this period of the lifespan. More importantly, these misguided stereotypes also influence professional practice in a manner detrimental to those who seek accurate information about midlife women's development. Professional and popular literature as well as educational programs concerned with midlife women continue to place a primary and sometimes exclusive focus on physical and emotional decline in this period. This practice serves to perpetuate the midlife myths of women preoccupied with menopause, depression and crisis.

The results of this study contribute clear and relevant images of midlife women for educational literature and program planning that will help undo outdated societal myths that misinform women as well as the general and professional population. These research results point to the complexity of women's lives along the midway, emphasize their resilience and personal strength, and contradict the prevalent image of crisis and decline in this period.

Workshops, programs and professional services that focus on the needs of midlife women should be guided by an awareness

of the totality of the midlife experience and the interplay of critical themes of self, relationships and life satisfaction as well as physical well-being that occur in the lives of contemporary midlife women. A constructive approach to women along the midway should involve an appreciation of their personal strength as well as a positive attitude about the midlife experience as a very fulfilling one in many aspects of life.

From their views along the midway, the women in this study characterize the path as a challenging but satisfying passage in which life experiences and awareness of self enhance the enjoyment of the midlife journey. While the results of this study help to illuminate and clarify the experience of a sample of contemporary women between the ages of 40 and 60, further qualitative research is needed. Such research will elaborate upon these findings and discover new dimensions to midlife development.

References

Achenberg, W.A. (1985). Religion in the lives of the elderly. In G. Lesnoff-Caravalglia (Ed.), Values, ethics and aging. New York: Human Sciences Press.

Amoss, P.T., & Harrell, S. (Eds.). (1981). Other ways of growing old. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Anderson, K., Armitage, S., Jack, D., & Wittner, J. (1990). Beginning where we are: Feminist methodology in oral history. In J.M. Nielson (Ed.), Feminist research methods. Boulder: Westview Press.

Antonucci, T. C. (1985). Personal characteristics, social support, and social behavior. In R. H. Binstock & E. Shanas (Eds.), Handbook of aging and the social sciences. New York: Van Nostrand.

Baltes, P.B. (1982). Life-span developmental psychology: Some converging observations on history and theory. In G. W. Schaie & J. Geiwitz (Eds.), Readings in adult development and aging. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Baltes, P.B. (1987). Theoretical propositions of life-span developmental psychology: On the dynamics between growth and decline. Developmental Psychology, 23:5, 611-626.

Baltes, P., & Nesselroade, J.R. (1979). History and rationale of longitudinal research. In J.R. Nesselroade & P. Baltes (Eds.), Longitudinal research in the study of behavior and development. New York: Academic Press.

Bamagin, V.E., & Hirn, K.F. (1982). Observations on changing relationships for older married women. American Journal for Psychoanalysis, 42(2), 133-142.

Barnett, R.C., & Baruch, G.K. (1978). Women in the middle years: A critique of research and theory. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 3(2), 187-98.

Barnett, R.C., & Baruch, G.K. (1978). The competent woman-Perspectives on development. New York: Irvington.

Barrow, G.M. & Smith, P.A. (1983). Aging, the individual, and society. St. Paul: West Publishing Company.

Barrow, G. (1986). Aging, the individual, and society. St. Paul: West Publishing Company.

Baruch, G. K. (1984). The psychological well-being of women in the middle years. In G.K. Baruch & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

Baruch, G., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (Eds.). (1984). Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

Baruch, G., Barnett, R., & Rivers, C. (1983). Lifeprints: New patterns of love and work for today's women. New York: New American Library.

Bearon, L.B. (1989). No great expectations: the underpinnings of life satisfaction for older women. Gerontologist, 29(6), 772-778.

Benin, M.H. & Nienstedt, B.C. (1985). Happiness in single- and dual-earner families: the effects of marital happiness, job satisfaction, and life cycle. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 47, 975-984.

Berger, K. S. (1988). The developing person through the life span. New York: Worth Publishers.

Berger, R.M. (1984). Realities of gay and lesbian aging. Social Work, 29(1), 57-62.

Berkun, C.S. (1985). Changing appearance for women in the middle years of life. In E. Markson (Ed.), Older women - Issues and prospects. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company.

Black, P., & Hill, J. (1984). The psychological well-being of women in their middle years. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 8, 282.

Block, J.D. & Greenberg, D. (1985). Women and friendship. New York: MacMillan.

Bobo, T.S. (1987, April). Midlife divorce and archetypes for women. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Southwestern Psychological Association. New Orleans, LA.

Bourbieux, P. (1980). Le sens pratique. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Bova, B.M. & Phillips, R.R. (1989). Hispanic women at midlife: implications for higher and adult education. Journal of Adult Education, 18(1), 9-15.

Brim, O.B., Jr., & Kagan, J. (Eds.). (1980). Constancy and change: a view of the issues. In O.G. Brim & J. Kagan (Eds.), Constancy and change in human development. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Brim, O.G., Jr., & Ryff, C.D. (1980). On the properties of life events. In P. Baltes & O.G. Brim (Eds.), Life-span development and behavior. volume 3. New York: Academic Press.

Brooks-Gunn, J. & Kirsh, B. (1984). Life events and the boundaries of midlife for women. In G.K. Baruch & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

Broschart, K.R. (1977, September). Sex roles and depression in middle age. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, IL.

Brown, H.G. (1993). The late show. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Brown, J.K., & Kerns, V. (Eds.). (1985). In her prime. South Hadley: Bergen and Garvey.

Bruner, J.S. (1974). Nature and uses of immaturity. In K.J. Connolly & J.S. Bruner (Eds.), The growth of competence. London: Academic Press.

Butler, R. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. In B. Neugarten (Ed.), Middle age and aging. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cavanaugh, J. (1990). Adult development and aging. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Chafe, W. (1977). Women and equality: changing patterns in American culture. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cherlin, F. & Furstenberg, F.F., Jr. (1986). The new American grandparent: A place in the family, a life apart. New York: Basic Books.

Chiriboga, D.A. (1989). Mental health at the midpoint: Crisis, challenge or relief? In S. Hunter and M. Sundel (Eds.), Midlife Myths. Newbury Park: SAGE.

Chodorow, N. (1974). Family structure and feminine personality. In M.Z. Rosaldo & L. Lamphere (Eds.), Woman, culture and society. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Coleman, L., & Antonucci, T. (1983). Impact of work on women at midlife. Developmental Psychology, 19 (2), 290-291.

Coleman, L., Antonucci, T., Adelmann, C., & Crohan, S. (1987). Social roles in the lives of middle-aged and older Black women. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 49(4), 761-771.

Crow, M.L. (1987). Midlife crisis. Clearing-House, 60(9), 413-15.

Dacey, J. (1982). Adult development. Glenview: Scott Foresman.

Dan, A.J. & Bernhard, L.A. (1989). Menopause and other health issues for midlife women. In S. Hunter and M. Sundel (Eds.), Midlife myths. Newbury Park: Sage.

Davis, C.B. (1990). Mythology of aging. Spectrum, 5-8.

DeLorey, C. (1984). Health care and midlife women. In G.K. Baruch & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

DeLorey, C. (1981). Health care for midlife women. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Harvard University, 1981.

Deutsch, H. (1945). The psychology of women. Volume 2. Grune and Stratton. New York: 1945.

Diekelmann, N. (1977). Primary health care of the well adult. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Doress, P.B. & Siegal, D.L. (1987). Ourselves, growing older. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Dychtwald, K., & Flower, J. (1989). Age wave - The challenges and opportunities of an aging America. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher Incorporated.

England, J. & Finch, J. (1991). Rural women: a thematic perspective on midlife. Canadian Journal of Counselling, 25(4)., 594-602.

Erikson, E. (1950). Childhood and society. New York: W.W. Norton.

Erikson, E. (1980). Identity and the life cycle. New York: W.W. Norton.

Erikson, E., Erikson, J., & Kivnick, H.Q. (1986). Vital involvement in old age. New York: W.W. Norton.

Farnham, C. (1987). The impact of feminist research on the academy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Fielding, E. (1984). Cultural scripts and aging. Transactional Analysis Journal, 14(1), 12-17.

Fodor, I., & Franks, V. (1990). Women in mid-life and beyond. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 14. 445-449.

Friedan, B. (1993). The fountain of age. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Geiger, S.N.G. (1986). Women's life histories: method and content. Signs, 11:2, 334-351.

Gergen, K. (1980). The emerging crisis in life-span developmental theory. In P. Baltes & O.G. Brim (Eds.), Life-span development and behavior. volume 3. New York: Academic Press.

Gergen, M. (1988). Toward a feminist metatheory and methodology in the social sciences. In M. Gergen (Ed.), Feminist thought and the structure of knowledge. New York: New York University Press.

Gergen, M. (1990). Finished at 40 - Women's development with the Patriarchy. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 14. 471-493.

Giele, J.Z. (1982). Women's work and family roles. In J.Z. Giele (Ed.), Women in the middle years. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Gilligan, C. (1982). Adult development and women's development: Arrangements for a marriage. In J.Z. Giele (Ed.), Women in the middle years. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice - Psychological theory and women's development. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Glick, P.C. & Sin, S-L. (1986). Recent changes in divorce and remarriage. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 40, 737-748.

Glick, R. (1980). Promoting competence and coping through retirement planning. In L. Bond & J.C. Rosen (Eds.), Competence and coping during adulthood. Hanover: University Press of New England.

Gognalons-Nicolet, M. (1985). The crossroads of menopause: A chance and a risk for the aging process of women. In E. Markson (Ed.), Older women - Issues and prospects. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company.

Gould, R. (1978). Transformations: Growth and change in adult life. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Green, A.L. & Boxer, A.M. (1986). Daughters and sons as young adults. In N. Datan, A. Greene, and H. W. Reese (Eds.), Lifespan developmental psychology: Intergenerational relations. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.

Greer, G. (1991). The change - Women, aging and the menopause. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Grossman, M. & Bart, P. B. (1980). The politics of menopause. In A.J. Dan, E.A. Graham & C.P. Beecher (Eds.), The menstrual cycle: A synthesis of interdisciplinary research. New York: Springer.

Grunbaum, H. (1979). Middle age and marriage: affiliative men and assertive women. American Journal of Family Therapy, 7(3), 46-50.

Gubrium, J., & Buckhold, D. (1977). Toward maturity. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Guillemard, A.M. (1982). Old age retirement and the social class structure: Toward an analysis of the structural dynamics of the later stage of life. In T.K. Hareven & K.J. Adams (Eds.), Aging and lifecourse transitions: An interdisciplinary perspective. London: Tavistock Publications.

Haan, N. (1985). Common personality dimensions or common organization across the life span? In J. M. Munnichs, P. Mussen, E. Olbrich, & P. G. Coleman (Eds.), Present and past in middle life. New York: Academic Press.

Hardcastle, B. (1985). Midlife themes of invisible citizens: an exploration into how ordinary people make sense of their lives. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 25(2), 45-63.

Hareven, T.K. (1982). The life course and aging in historical perspective. In T.K. Hareven (Ed.), Aging and life course transitions: An interdisciplinary perspective. New York: Guilford.

Harris, R.L.; Ellicott, A.M., & Holmes, D.S. (1986). The Timing of psychosocial transitions and changes in women's lives: An examination of women aged 45 to 60. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51, 409-416.

Helson, R. & Moane, G. (1987). Personality change in women from college to midlife. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52, 1176-1186.

Helson, R. & Wink, P. (1992). Personality changes in women from the early 40's to the early 50's. Psychology and Aging, 7 (1), 46-55.

Hoff, L.A. (1989). People in crisis. Redwood City: Addison Wesley.

Hoff, L.A. (1990). Battered women as survivors. New York: Routledge.

Holt, M.E. (1982). Myth understanding for mid-life women. Lifelong Learning: The Adult Years. 6(3), 20-21.

Horn, J.C. & Meer, J. (1987). The vintage years. Psychology Today, 21(5), 76-90.

Hultsch, D.F., & Plemons, J.K. (1979). Life events and life-span development. In P. Baltes & O.G. Brim, Jr. (Eds.), Life-span development and behavior. volume 2. New York: Academic Press.

Hunter, S. & Sundel, M. (Eds.). (1989). Midlife myths. Newbury Park: SAGE.

Hyde, J. S. (1985). Half the human experience - The psychology of women. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company.

Hymowitz, C., & Weissman, M. (1978). A history of women in America. New York: Bantam Books.

Jacobs, R. (1987). Older women: Surviving and thriving. Milwaukee: Family Service America.

Johnston, M.A., & Page, S. (1989, August). Subject age and gender as predictors of life stress, attributional style, and personal adjustment. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association. New Orleans, LA.

Kaplan, P.S. (1988). The human odyssey: Life-span development. St. Paul: West Publishing.

Kastenbaum, R. & Costa, P.T. (1977). Psychological perspectives on death. Annual Review of Psychology, 28, 225-249.

Katchadourian, H. (1987). Fifty: midlife in perspective. New York: Freeman.

Klein, R.D. (1989). How to do what we want to do: Thoughts about feminist methodology. In G. Bowles & R. D. Klein (Eds.), Theories of women's studies. New York: Rutledge Press.

Lachman, M.E. (1984). Methods for a life-span developmental approach to women in the middle years. In G.K. Baruch & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

Lehman, D.R. (1987). Long-term effects of losing a spouse or child in a motor vehicle accident. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52, 218-231.

Lerman, H. (1986). A mote in Freud's eye. New York: Springer.

Levinson, D. J., Darrow, C. N., Klein, E. B., Levinson, M. H., & McKee, B.. (1978). The seasons of a man's life. New York: Ballantine.

Loevinger, J. (1976). Ego development. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Loevinger, J., & Wessler, R. (1970). Measuring ego development. volume 1. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Loevinger, J., Wessler, R., & Redmore, C. (1970). Measuring ego development. volume 2. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Long, J. & Porter, K.L. (1984). Multiple roles of midlife women: a case for new directions in theory, research and policy. In G. K. Baruch & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

Lopata, H. Z., & Barnewolt, D. (1984). The middle years - changes and variations in social role commitments. In G. K. Baruch & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

Luria, Z. & Meade, R.G. (1984). Sexuality and the middle-aged woman. In G. K. Baruch & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

Maddy, J.E. (1985, April). Midlife women: the need to nurture self. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association for Counseling and Development. New York, NY.

Markson, E. (Ed.). (1985). Older women - Issues and prospects. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company.

Mathews, M.A. (1979). Depression in late mid-life: Change or repetition? Another chance for working it through. Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 12(1), 37-55.

McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T., Jr. (1984). Emerging lives, enduring dispositions. Boston: Little, Brown.

Melamed, E. (1983). Mirror, mirror. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Meyer, J. (1988). Feminist thought and social psychology. In M. Gergen (Ed.), Feminist thought and the structure of knowledge. New York: New York University Press.

Mies, M. (1989). Towards a methodology for feminist research. In G. Bowles & R. D. Klein (Eds.), Theories of women's studies. New York: Routledge Press.

Miller, J. B. (1986). Toward a new psychology of women. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mishler, E. G. (1986). Research interviewing. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mitchell, V. & Helson, R. (1990). Women's prime of life - Is it the 50's?. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 14, 451-70.

Montmeyer, R. (1986). Family variation in parent-adolescent storm and stress. Journal of Adolescent Research, 1, 15-31.

Nadelson, T. (1990). On purpose, successful aging, and the myth of innocence. Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 23 (1), 3-12.

Nathanson, C.A., & Lorenz, G. (1982). Women and health: The social dimensions of biomedical data. In J. Z. Giele (Ed.), Women in the middle years. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Neugarten, B. (1979). Time, age and the life cycle. American Journal of Psychiatry, 136:7, 887-894.

Neugarten, B. (1980). Act your age: Must everything be a midlife crisis? Annual Editions: Human Development, 1980/1981, 289-290. Guilford: Dushkin Publishers.

Neugarten, B., & Datan, N. (1973). Sociological perspectives on the life cycle. In P. Baltes & K. W. Schaie (Eds.), Life-span developmental psychology. New York: Academic Press.

Neugarten, B., & Datan, N. (1981). The subjective experience of middle age. In L. Steinberg & L. Mandelbaum (Eds.), The life cycle. New York: Columbia University Press.

Neugarten, B., & Moore, J. W. (1968). The changing age-status system. In B. Neugarten (Ed.), Middle age and aging. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Neugarten, B., Wood, V., Kraines, R., & Loomis, B. (1968). Women's attitude toward the menopause. In B. Neugarten (Ed.), Middle age and aging. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Newman, B.M. (1982). Mid-life development. In B.B. Wolman (Ed.), Handbook of developmental psychology. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

Notman, M.T. (1977). Midlife concerns of women: implications of the menopause. American Journal of Psychiatry, 136(10), 1270-1274.

Notman, M.T. (1982). The displaced homemaker: a crisis of later life - the midlife years and after. Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 15(2), 173-186.

Older Women's League. (1986). Report on the Status of Midlife and Older Women in America. Mother's Day Report 1986. Washington, D.C.: Older Women's League.

Paige, J. & Gordon, P. (1991). Choice years. New York: Villard Books.

Palmore, E. (1990). Ageism: Negative and positive. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Parlee, M.B. (1984). Reproductive issues, including menopause. In G. K. Baruch & J. Brooks-Gunn (Eds.), Women in midlife. New York: Plenum Press.

Pearlin, L., & Johnson, J.S. (1977). Marital status, life strains and depression. American Sociological Review, 42, 704-15.

Peck, R.C. (1968). Psychological developments in the second half of life. In B. Neugarten (Ed.), Middle age and aging. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peck, T. (1986). Women's self-definition in adulthood: From a different model? Psychology of Women Quarterly, 10, 274.

Pfeiffer, E. & Davis, G.C. (1972). Determinants of sexual behavior in middle and old age. Journal of the American Geriatric Society, 20, 151-158.

Porcino, J. (1991). Growing older, getting better: A handbook for women in the second half of life. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Quam, J.K. & Whitford, G.S. (1992). Adaptation and age-related expectations of older gay and lesbian adults. Gerontologist, 42(3), 367-374.

Reinharz, S. (1992). Feminist methods in social research. New York: Oxford University Press.

Reitz, R. (1977). Menopause: A positive approach. Radnor: Chilton.

Roberts, P., & Newton, P. M. (1987). Levinsonian studies of women's adult development. Psychology and Aging, 2, 154-163.

Rossi, A. (1980). Lifespan theories and women's lives. Signs, 6, 4-32.

Rubin, L. B. (1979). Women of a certain age. New York: Harper and Row.

Rubin, L. B. (1985). Just friends. New York: Harper and Row.

Rybash, J., Roodin, P., & Santrock, J. (1991). Adult development and aging. New York: Wm. C. Brown.

Sands, R. G. & Richardson, V. (1986). Clinical practice with women in their middle years. Social Work, 31(1), 36-43.

Schaie, K. W., & Geiwitz, J. (Eds.). (1982). Readings in adult development and aging. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Shanas, E. (1979). Social myth as hypothesis: the case of the family relations of old people. The Gerontologist, 19, 3-20.

Sheehy, G. (1976). Passages: predictable crises of adult life. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Sheehy, G. (1992). The silent passage - menopause. New York: Random House.

Sheppard, H. (1990). Damaging stereotypes about aging are taking hold: how to counter?. Perspective on Aging, 19(1), 4-8.

Sherif, C.W. (1987). Bias in psychology. In S. Harding (Ed.), Feminism and methodology. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Sidel, R. (1986). Women and children first- the plight of poor women in affluent America. New York: Viking.

Sigelman, C., & Shaffer, D. (1991). Life-span human development. Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

Smith, D. (1979). A sociology for women. In J. Sherman & E.T. Beck (Eds.) The prism of sex: Essays in the sociology of knowledge. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Smith, M. B. (1968). Competence and socialization. In J. A. Clausen (Ed.), Socialization and society. Boston: Little Brown.

Sontag, S. (1972). The double standard of aging. Saturday Review, 55(39), 29-38.

Stein, C. (1994, February). The two-headed crisis. The Boston Sunday Globe, p.A1, A7.

Targ, J. (1979). Toward a reassessment of women's experience at middle age. Family Stage Coordinator, 28(3), 377-382.

Tough, A. (1982). Intentional changes: A fresh approach to helping people change. Chicago: Follet.

Traupmann, J. (1982, March). Midlife women in continuing education: a comparative study. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, NY.

Twombly, S.B. (1991). New directions for studying women in higher education: Lessons from feminist phase theory. Initiatives, 54(1), 9-17.

Vaillant, G. (1977). Adaptation to life. Boston: Little, Brown.

Waring, M. (1988). If women counted. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Weg, R.B. (1992, March). Demography: Older women. Report given at the American Society on Aging Conference. San Diego.

Westkott, M. (1979). Feminist criticism of the social sciences. Harvard Educational Review, 49(4), 422-430.

White, R.W. (1959). Motivation reconsidered: The concept of competence. Psychological Review, 66: 297-333.

Wiggins, J. (1973). Personality and prediction: Principles of personality assessment. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Worrell, J. (1990). Images of women in psychology. In M. Paludi & G. Stenernagel (Eds.), Foundations for a feminist restructuring of the disciplines. New York: Harrington Park Press.

Wrightsman, L. (1988). Personality development in adulthood. New York: SAGE Publications.

Young-Eisendrath, P. (1988). The female person and how we talk about her. In M. Gergen (Ed.), Feminist thought and the structure of knowledge. New York: New York University Press.

Appendix

Appendix A: Introductory Letter to Participants

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Appendix A

Introductory Letter to Participants

Dear :

As part of my Ph.D. in Educational Studies at Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I am doing research on the experience of American women born between 1934 and 1953. As part of this study, I would like to interview you concerning various aspects of your life.

During my research I will interview 24 women in the greater Boston area during the months of June, July and August, 1993. The results of my interviews will be published in spring 1994 in my doctoral dissertation.

I expect that the interview will be 90 minutes long. It will be scheduled at a time and place that is mutually convenient. With the consent of each participant, I will tape record each interview. Any information obtained during the interviews will be kept strictly confidential in the dissemination of the information.

In appreciation of your participation in this research, I am able to offer you a $25.00 payment at the completion of the interview to partially reimburse you for your time.

I will contact you in the next few days to answer any questions you may have concerning your participation in my research through a personal interview.

Thank you very much for your time and assistance.

Sincerely,
Paula DeAngelis Panchuck

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

I agree to participate in an interview as part of the study Women and the Midlife Experience conducted by Paula Panchuck. I understand that the interview will be tape recorded and transcribed at a later date. The transcriptions will use code numbers instead of names to identify respondents. The participant/code number list will be maintained in a confidential and secure manner. All information I give will be strictly confidential.

I understand that the information from this study will be published as part of Ms. Panchuck's doctoral dissertation but that my name will not be used in any dissemination of the obtained information or in specific quotations from my interview.

I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question in this interview and that I have the right to terminate my participation before, during or after the interview takes place.

If I have any questions about this research project, I understand that I may contact Ms. Panchuck (508-653-7850) or Dr. Catherine M. DeLorey in the School of Management of Lesley College (617-349-8349).

I have read this informed consent form and I understand all of the information it contains.

Signature:
Date:

Appendix C

Interview Questions

code # _____

Let me begin by thanking you for participating in my research. I am interested in learning more about the lives of American women between ages 40 and 60 as part of my doctoral dissertation study at Lesley College. The questions that I will ask you are for the purpose of learning about **your** experiences and feelings as a woman in this age group.

Some of the questions are quite general and others are more specific about your thoughts on particular aspects of your life.

Please answer the questions as thoroughly as you can and feel free to refrain from answering any question that you find uncomfortable or compromising in any way. Your responses will be confidential.

I. Personal Information

Let me begin by asking some general questions about you that will be helpful in the analysis of my research findings.

1. What is your date of birth?

2. Which of the following categories apply to you?
   1. never married
   2. married
   3. unmarried but living with a male partner
   4. unmarried but living with a female partner
   5. divorced
   6. separated
   7. widowed

3. Do you have children?

4. What is the last year of school you completed?

5. Are you currently employed outside the home?

6. How many years have you been employed outside the home?

7. What is your occupation?

8 . Which of the following categories describes your annual personal income?

1. less than $10,000.
2. $10,000. - $20,000.
3. $20,000. - $30,000.
4. $30,000. - $40,000.
5. more than $40,000.

9. Which of the following categories describes your annual family or household income?

1. less than $10,000.
2. $10,000. - $20,000.
3. $20,000. - $30,000.
4. $30,000. - $40,000.
5. $40,000. - $50,000.
6. $50,000. - $60,000.
7. $60,000. - $70,000.
8. more than $70,000.

10. There are a number of different ways that women can be described. One way is how women relate to other persons sexually. Which category best describes you?

1. relate sexually only to women
2. relate sexually to men and women but prefer women
3. relate sexually to men and women but prefer men
4. relate sexually to men and women equally
5. relate sexually only to men
6. do not relate sexually to either men or women

11. How long has this applied to you?

1. always
2. less than five years
3. 5 - 10 years
4. 10-20 years
5. more than 20 years

12. What is your ethnic background?

II. Expectations of Midlife and Aging

During this part of our interview, I'd like to ask you about your expectations of what life would be like in this phase of adulthood.

1. Looking back to the years before age 40, what did you expect your life to be like right now?

2. Where did your expectations from?

3. Is your life after age 40 thus far what you expected it would be? Why or why not?

4. When you think about being ten years older than you are now, what is the picture of yourself that you see in your mind's eye? How do you feel about that picture? Why?

5. Where do your expectations of aging come from?

III. The Midlife Years

I'd like to ask you about your life right now.

1. How would you describe your life right now as a (insert age)-year-old woman?

2. Are there advantages or benefits to being the age you are right now? Please describe them.

3. Are there disadvantages or difficulties in being the age you are? Please describe them.

4. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't touched upon?

Probes for section III.

What about your.....?
- self-confidence
- sense of competence
- self-awareness
- personal influence on others
- appearance
- health and fitness
- feelings about your sexuality and sexual activity
- experience of menopause
- financial security
- the role of your job/occupation in your life
- relationship with your children
- relationship with your husband or partner
- relationship with your parents
- relationship with your siblings
- friendships
- spiritual beliefs
- feelings about the choices you've made in life
- view of "midlife crisis" in your life

0 1139 0215163 9
LESLEY COLLEGE

DATE DUE

For Reference

Not to be taken from this room

LUDCKE LIBRARY
Lesley College
30 Wellington Street
Cambridge, MA 02138-2790